

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

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Growing the Banyan Tree:  
Early Sikh Tradition in the Works of Bhai Gurdas Bhalla

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree  
Doctor of Philosophy in Religious Studies

by

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September 2009

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## DEDICATION

For JS Grewal,  
    who inspired this work,  
and GS Mann,  
    who saw it through.

*pavan prasang soī kāsai sṛīkhand hot  
malayā gir bāsanā su mand pargās hai*

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## ABSTRACT

Growing the Banyan Tree:

Early Sikh Tradition in the Works of Bhai Gurdas Bhalla

by

Rahuldeep Singh Gill

This dissertation revisits the life and works of one of the Sikh tradition's first and best-known interpretive writers, Bhai Gurdas Bhalla (d. 1636). In introducing this "Saint Paul" of Sikhism to an English audience, this dissertation argues that the most important operative methodology to understand Gurdas's works is to read his writings in light of the context in which they were written. I argue that the previous works on Gurdas's career assume much of the traditional depictions of his project, few of which are verifiable, many of which are incongruous amongst themselves and inconsistent with Gurdas's self-conception in his own writings.

This dissertation assesses the current understanding of Gurdas's life by tracing the development of his biography through history, from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries. By revisiting traditional accounts in their chronological order, I am better able to assess their coloring of Gurdas's legacy, allowing for a clearer vision of his project to emerge. Moreover, this dissertation re-dates

Gurdas's works, analyzes them closely for information about early Sikh life, and shifts the academic focus to his Brajbhasha quatrains, as well as the long Punjabi poems that have received the majority of scholarly attention thus far.

For centuries, Gurdas's writings have been a definitive source of information for Sikh life. I lay out the core beliefs that Gurdas espouses in his writings, and examine how they functioned in community construction. I investigate the conduct codes and ethics that Gurdas advances in his works, and also use them to help reconstruct early Sikh practices. I argue that, through his writings, Gurdas was successful in helping his tradition to overcome sectarian strife, and ensured his sectarian group's dominance in the Sikh tradition. The dissertation concludes with an analysis of Gurdas's project and presents an updated biography of this important Sikh thinker.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Chapter One: Sources for the Study of Gurdas's Career	18
Chapter Two: An Introduction to Gurdas's Works	53
Chapter Three: Three Shelters: Early Sikh Beliefs	80
Chapter Four: Walking the Straight Path: Early Sikh Ethics	119
Chapter Five: Bodies in Bliss: Early Sikh Practices	156
Chapter Six: A Banyan Orchard: Gurdas's Vision of Sikh Ascendancy	194
Conclusion: Bhai Gurdas Bhalla in Context and Legacy	227
Bibliography	240

## Introduction

Recent monographs have treated various Sikh texts of the pre-modern period. Scholars have traced the development of Sikh scripture in the 1500s, showing the steady growth of the burgeoning Sikh community around a clearly delineated scriptural canon.<sup>1</sup> Adding to the scholarship of that early period, many scholars have recently translated and interpreted Sikh scripture, adding to a sizable collection of literature on the subject.<sup>2</sup> The early hagiographic traditions have also been treated,<sup>3</sup> and biographies of the Sikh Gurus, the tradition's founding figures, have been advanced.<sup>4</sup> Scholars have done commendable work editing and translating Sikh codes of conduct, and have shown the development of the Sikh

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<sup>1</sup> Gurinder Singh Mann, *The Making of Sikh Scripture* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), Pashaura Singh, *The Guru Granth Sahib: Canon, Meaning, and Authority* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, *The Name of My Beloved: Verses of the Sikh Gurus* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2003). Christopher Shackle and Arvind-pal Singh Mandair, eds., *Teachings of the Sikh Gurus: Selections from the Sikh Scriptures* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> W. H. McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). W. H. McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), Kirpal Singh, *The Janamsakhi Tradition: An Analytical Study* (Amritsar: Singh Brothers, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> See J. S. Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History* (Chandigarh: Panjab University Publications Bureau, 1969). See also Pashaura Singh, *Life and Work of Guru Arjan* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006). Dr. Grewal has updated his previous findings on Guru Gobind Singh: J. S. Grewal, "Guru Gobind Singh: Life and Mission," *Journal of Punjab Studies (Special Issue on Guru Gobind Singh)* 15, no. 1 & 2 (2008). Other articles in this journal issue also provide excellent new directions for the reconstruction of the tenth Guru's life.

moral tradition from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries.<sup>5</sup> Recent doctoral dissertations promise forthcoming monographs adding new insights to the development of the Sikh martial tradition from the eighteenth century onwards.<sup>6</sup>

### **Bhai Gurdas Bhalla**

Sikh history in the seventeenth century, however, remains largely unexplored.<sup>7</sup> One vital group of writings from the period between the compilation of Sikh scripture around 1600 and the elevation of the Khalsa around 1700, offer a mine of information that has not yet been adequately examined. I refer here to the writings of Bhai Gurdas Bhalla (d. 1636), whose corpus, according to Sikh scholar Hew McLeod, “constitute[s] a source of considerable importance, one which has yet to receive the close scrutiny and analysis which it deserves”.<sup>8</sup> These words ring

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<sup>5</sup> W. H. McLeod, *Sikhs of the Khalsa: A History of the Khalsa Rahit* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), Nripinder Singh, *The Sikh Moral Tradition: Ethical Perceptions of the Sikhs in the Late Nineteenth / Early Twentieth Century* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> Purnima Dhavan, "The Warriors' Way: The Making of the Eighteenth-Century "Khalsa Panth"" (Ph.D., University of Virginia, 2003). Anne Murphy, "The Material of Sikh History" (Ph.D., Columbia University, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> By the seventeenth century, the early Sikh tradition was a minority religion situated amongst a broader context of Muslim and Hindu practitioners. Islam had been in South Asia since Arab traders introduced it there in the seventh century. In the eighth century Muhammad bin Qasim brought Sindh under the Umayyad Caliphate, and Mahmud of Ghazna conquered Lahore in the tenth century. Sunni, Shi'a, and Sufi varieties of Islam thrived in Punjab for centuries before the foundation of the Sikh tradition. Amongst Hindu elements of society, the Nath Yogis were a factor in rural Punjab, while the Vaishnava practitioners provided the urban expression of Hindu practices. For an introduction to the Sikh tradition, see: J. S. Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*, Revised (II.3) ed. (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 1999). See also Gurinder Singh Mann, *Sikhism* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> W. H. McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition : A Study of the Janam-Sakhis* (Oxford : Clarendon Press: New York, 1980), 7.

even more true today than when they were written three decades ago. Thus the present study takes up the life and legacy of this important Sikh to fill this academic void.

The writings of Bhai Gurdas Bhalla (hereafter, Gurdas)<sup>9</sup> are the most prominent interpretive works in the Sikh literary tradition, second only to the compositions of the Gurus themselves. Gurdas wrote over 1500 stanzas of poetry of two types: long Punjabi poems known as *vārs*, and quatrains in Brajbhāshā, which are frequently referred as the *kabitt-savaiyyās*, or simply, *kabitts*.<sup>10</sup> As early as the eighteenth century, Sikh writers quoted Gurdas's works as authoritative sources for Sikh life.<sup>11</sup> From the early nineteenth century onward, British observers' Sikh informers directed the outsiders to Gurdas's *vārs* to understand Sikh beliefs and history. Early twentieth century Sikh intellectuals relied heavily on Gurdas's ideas as they helped their tradition confront the challenges of modernity.<sup>12</sup>

Today, these writings are a definitive source of authority on Sikh beliefs. Because his works clarify some of the fundamental issues in Sikh life, Gurdas is

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<sup>9</sup> Bhai is a title of respect, meaning "brother" and Bhalla was his family name. As we will see below, Gurdas was referred to Bhai as early as 1700, and most likely during his own lifetime.

<sup>10</sup> Subsequently, *vārs* will be denoted by the abbreviation "v," followed by decimals and numerals for *vār* number, stanza number, and line number. Similarly *kabitts* will be represented with "k," followed by the stanza and line numbers.

<sup>11</sup> The first of these was the *Rahitnama* of Chaupa Singh, treated in the next chapter.

<sup>12</sup> Among these modernist writers were Bhai Kahn Singh and Bhai Jodh Singh. Their reliance on Gurdas is treated in the next chapter.

only one of two writers outside of the scriptural canon whose compositions are approved for recitation in Sikh worship.<sup>13</sup> Gurdas's body of writings has been considered by Sikhs to be a storehouse of Sikh ideals, and the definitive commentary on Sikh scripture.

As a historical figure, Gurdas stands among the prominent personalities in the Sikh tradition. He is depicted as a traveling preacher of Sikh tenets, an exemplar of Sikh ethics, a trusted advisor to the Sikh Gurus, and the scribe of an early Sikh scriptural manuscript, known today as the Kartarpur Pothis. Within seven decades of its founder's death, the Sikh community witnessed the fifth Guru's execution, and its increased politicization under the sixth Guru. J. S. Grewal, the leading Sikh historian, has noted that Gurdas lived through a time of decisive transition for the Sikh tradition.<sup>14</sup>

Gurdas's works not only reflect such important historical changes, but articulate the foundations on which major late seventeenth and early eighteenth century developments in Sikh history—such as the elevation of the community to Khalsa and the abolition of personal Guruship—were possible.<sup>15</sup> Via the critical examination of Gurdas's writings, we will witness the process by which a religious

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<sup>13</sup> *Sikh Rahit Maryada*, (Amritsar: Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, 1978).

<sup>14</sup> I argue that his works are a response to the crisis, and therefore provide an incomparable resource to understand what internal change in the community looked like.

<sup>15</sup> These developments begin in the late 1690s, with the tenth Sikh Guru's (Guru Gobind Singh) elevation of the community to Khalsa ("the pure"), announcing it that was free from mediation by local leaders and was answerable directly to the Guru. At his death in 1708, when the Guru named no human successor, the Guru Granth (Sikh scripture) and Panth (the community as a whole) shared the authority office of Guru.



tradition crystallizes its perception of itself and other communities in its context. This will advance the historiography of the Sikh tradition, our understanding of the tradition's self-conception, and our knowledge of its doctrinal, textual, and ritual bedrock.

### **Late Twentieth Century Scholarship**

Scholars writing in English about the Sikh tradition have, for decades, looked to Gurdas's vārs as historical sources. W. H. McLeod uses Gurdas's vārs as a touchstone to date and authenticate other important Sikh manuscripts, and counter the traditional date of Nanak's birth.<sup>16</sup> The vārs are pivotal to Surjit Hans' *Reconstruction of Sikh History*.<sup>17</sup> Nripinder Singh says the intellectual history of the Sikhs begins with Gurdas, and his writings are foundational to the tradition's later ethical writings.<sup>18</sup> J. S. Grewal relies on the vārs to build the history of the early community.<sup>19</sup> In his *Making of Sikh Scripture*, Gurinder Singh Mann uses Gurdas's vārs to reconstruct the earliest phases of Sikh history.<sup>20</sup> Historians look to Gurdas's accounts of Nanak's life to uncover details often overlooked by other

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<sup>16</sup> McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*, 17, 18n, 21, 94-5.

<sup>17</sup> Surjit Hans, *A Reconstruction of Sikh History from Sikh Literature* (Jalandhar, India: ABS Publications, 1988), 180-3.

<sup>18</sup> Singh, *The Sikh Moral Tradition: Ethical Perceptions of the Sikhs in the Late Nineteenth / Early Twentieth Century*, 20.

<sup>19</sup> Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*, 50-80.

<sup>20</sup> Mann, *The Making of Sikh Scripture*, 7, 19, 118.

traditional sources — for example, that Nanak carried with him on his travels a collection of his own compositions.<sup>21</sup> Lou Fenech says that the concept of martyrdom in the Sikh tradition does not become salient until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and uses Gurdas's vārs to argue for a lack of concern with martyrdom in early Sikh literature.<sup>22</sup> Pashaura Singh relies heavily on Gurdas's vārs for reconstruction of Guru Arjan's biography.<sup>23</sup>

Scholars writing in Punjabi have done the vast majority of modern research on Gurdas, and this dissertation will build on that body of work. Critical treatments of Gurdas's life and works first appear in the mid-to-late twentieth century. Also beginning at that time, Gurdas's corpus was used as a historical source for the reconstruction of early Sikh life. Relying largely on his depiction in nineteenth century traditions, leading literary critics and historians of Punjabi literature produced multiple monographs on Gurdas. Reference literature on his works and translations of his works emerge during the late twentieth century as well.

Harinder Singh Roop's *Bhai Gurdas* is the first in a series of Punjabi monographs detailing traditions about this important figure's life and providing critical examination of his works.<sup>24</sup> After Roop, Sant Singh Sekhon, the leading

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>22</sup> Louis E. Fenech, *Martyrdom in the Sikh Tradition: Playing the 'Game of Love'*, Paperback ed. (New Delhi: Oxford India Press, 2005), 9.

<sup>23</sup> Singh, *The Guru Granth Sahib: Canon, Meaning, and Authority*.

<sup>24</sup> Harinder Singh Roop, *Bhai Gurdas* (Amritsar: Hind Publishers, 1952).

Punjabi literary critic of the twentieth century, approaches Gurdas's project from a Marxist perspective, interpreting the vārs (he leaves aside the kabitts) as revolutionary documents.<sup>25</sup> According to Sekhon, Bhai Gurdas articulates the anti-establishment, anti-Mughal grumblings that arose from the agrarian base of the Sikh population, and this, for Sekhon, explains their utilization of a rustic Punjabi idiom.<sup>26</sup>

These monographs establish precedent for the studies on Gurdas's life and works, both in terms of their structure and approach. For example, like Sekhon before him, Rattan Singh Jaggi, a scholar of Sikh literature, discusses Gurdas's doctrinal articulations as central tools in the Sikh movement's attempts to establish a "new society" in Northern India, with a populist, anti-establishment orientation.<sup>27</sup> Kishan Singh argues that Gurdas's centrality to the Sikh tradition lies in his works' ability to articulate the central beliefs of the scripture and parallel it as a revolutionary text.<sup>28</sup>

Darshan Singh's work expands upon Jaggi's brief monograph (which was first published in 1974), following the clear paradigm for the presentation of Gurdas's life and works set before him. Darshan Singh's monograph, however,

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<sup>25</sup> Sant Singh Sekhon, *Bhai Gurdas: Ik Adhiain* (Ludhiana: Lahore Book Shop, 1975).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>27</sup> Rattan Singh Jaggi, *Bhai Gurdas: Jivan Te Rachna*, Third ed. (Patiala: Punjabi University Publication Bureau, 2000).

<sup>28</sup> Kishan Singh, "Bhai Gurdas Te Samajak Banhtar," in *Bhai Gurdas: Jivan Te Rachna*, ed. Kapur Singh Ghuman (Patiala: Bhasha Vibhag, 1983).

stands on its own as the most comprehensive treatment of the data for Gurdas's life and works in any language.<sup>29</sup> Darshan Singh recognizes that Gurdas's works are written purposefully for the clear elucidation of Sikh beliefs during a time when detractors of the community sought to dislodge Sikh religious power.

In terms of the structure of the monographs, Harnek Singh Komal, Punjabi poet and literary critic, follows the set paradigm by building a book out of brief summaries and primary source quotes on a series of themes pulled from Gurdas's vārs. Komal recognizes that the vārs are a key source for knowledge about Gurus Nanak to Hargobind, and about the social and religious realities of Gurdas's day.<sup>30</sup> According to Komal, Gurdas's works tell us about the populace's frustrations with its contemporary political situation, and Guru Hargobind's political and military intentions. They tell us about Hindu-Muslim strife, and the solution to the problems being available in the Sikh community.<sup>31</sup> Brahmjagdish Singh's is another solid retelling of Gurdas's life and an analysis of his works, which fits the well-trodden structure established by his predecessors.<sup>32</sup>

Of all of Gurdas's works, Vārs 1 (which includes his life-story of Guru

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<sup>29</sup> Darshan Singh, *Bhai Gurdas: Sikhī De Pahile Viākhīākār*, Second ed. (Patiala: Punjabi University Publication Bureau, 1997).

<sup>30</sup> Harnek Singh Komal, *Bhai Gurdas: Jīvan Te Rachna* (Amritsar: Varis Shah Foundation, 2001), 43-6, 47-50.

<sup>31</sup> For examples: God, the Guru, the Guru lineage, Sikh Path, the Congregation, devotion, the Gurmukh (pious), the *manmukh* (impious), Truth and falsehood, good and evil, the Guru's treasury, creation, the mind, knowledge and ignorance, pleasure and suffering.

<sup>32</sup> Brahmjagdish Singh, *Bhai Gurdas: Rachana Sansar* (Amritsar: Varis Shah Foundation, 2000).

Nanak) and 10 (which advances Sikh retellings of some popular Vaishnava myths) receive the most attention in modern scholarship. Gurdev Singh's article provides a literary analysis of the Tenth Vār, while presenting the poem's virtues to counterbalance its controversial, Hindu themes.<sup>33</sup> Scholars report that particularly orthodox Sikhs saw the vār as a spurious writing, which could not have been the work of Bhai Gurdas.<sup>34</sup> Ram Singh's commentary on Gurdas's First Vār explains the impetus behind the poem from a traditional perspective. Ram Singh bypasses the question about whether the miraculous episodes in Guru Nanak's life that Gurdas captures can be historically verified.<sup>35</sup> Dalip Singh Deep's "Critical and Comparative Study" uses Gurdas's First Vār as a lens to provide an outline of Gurdas's thoughts, including those on the six Indian philosophical systems and Gurdas's cosmology. Deep and others have been interested in the historicity of Bhai Gurdas's Vār and his treatment of Guru Nanak.<sup>36</sup>

In general, Gurdas's Punjabi vārs have been treated much more extensively than the Brajbhāshā quatrains. Focusing on the vārs, Principal Jodh Singh compares Gurdas's mission with that of Guru Nanak by juxtaposing each of their

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<sup>33</sup> Gurdev Singh, "Bhai Gurdas Di Dasvin Var - Ik Vishleshanh," in *Bhai Gurdas: Jivan Te Rachna*, ed. Kapur Singh Ghuman (Patiala: Bhasha Vibhag, 1983).

<sup>34</sup> I refer here to Nripinder Singh and Pritam Singh's discussion of Teja Singh Bhasaur and Lal Singh Sangrur, respectively. Please Chapter Two.

<sup>35</sup> Ram Singh, "Bhai Gurdas Di Pahili Var," in *Bhai Gurdas: Jivan Te Rachna*, ed. Kapur Singh Ghuman (Patiala: Bhasha Vibhag, 1983).

<sup>36</sup> Dalip Singh Deep, *Bhai Gurdas Di Pehli Vār: Ik Alochnātmak Ate Tulnātmak Adhiān* (Ludhiana: Lahore Book Shop, 2000).

political compositions. Jodh Singh astutely focuses on Gurdas's dispelling of doubts about the political and military changes that Guru Hargobind had introduced to the community following the death of Guru Arjan, and justifying those changes. This, says Jodh Singh, is evidence that the young Sikh community of the early seventeenth century had begun to imagine the possibilities of establishing themselves as a distinct political group.<sup>37</sup> Gurdip Singh Pakhariwala evaluates Gurdas's works as cultural documents, particularly as the advancement of Sikh culture (which he calls *gurmat sabhiachār*).<sup>38</sup> Ravinder Kaur's critical analysis of Gurdas's vārs begins with a glimpse of his life and assessment of his life's work, and then surveys the vārs after placing them historically in the extensive tradition of that Punjabi genre.<sup>39</sup> Gurdas is an important part of Taran Singh's analysis of Sikh commentarial traditions, which argues that oral interpretation of the Sikh scripture was probably being done in the late sixteenth century, and that Gurdas's writings are literary, poetic inheritance of that tradition.<sup>40</sup> Gurbaksh Singh Shant's linguistic analysis of the vārs ranks among the most comprehensive and innovative available and includes a discussion of Gurdas's stanza structure, his use of comedic

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<sup>37</sup> Jodh Singh, "Bhai Gurdas Ji De Rajsi Vicar," in *Bhai Gurdas: Jivan Te Rachna*, ed. Kapur Singh Ghuman (Patiala: Bhasha Vibhag, 1983).

<sup>38</sup> Gurdip Singh Pakhariwala, *Gurmati-Sabhiachar Te Bhai Gurdas* (Amritsar: Ravi Sahita Prakashan, 1991).

<sup>39</sup> Ravinder Kaur, *Bhai Gurdas Dī Vichārdhārā* (Mohali: Harjit Singh Mirgind Singh, 1992).

<sup>40</sup> Taran Singh, *Gurbani Dian Viakhia Paranalian* (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1997), 40.

content, and his themes.<sup>41</sup>

Influential Punjabi scholar Piara Singh Padam's "Bhai Gurdas Di Hindi Rachna" is a unique article dedicated to Gurdas's Brajbhāshā poetry. Padam provides much-needed context for the use of Hindi in the 1600s. He argues that Gurdas is one of Punjab's most important Hindi poets during the Mughal period, and wrote during a golden age for Hindi literature, which was patronized as one of the fine arts of the time.<sup>42</sup>

Reference works from the modern period facilitate research on Gurdas's works. Critical editions of Gurdas's vārs and kabitts have been edited by Gursharan Kaur Jaggi and Oankar Singh, respectively.<sup>43</sup> Two reference dictionaries for Gurdas's works have been recently been published as well.<sup>44</sup> Oankar Singh, Amritpal Kaur and Rattan Singh Jaggi have included thorough indices of every word in Gurdas's lexicon.<sup>45</sup> Bhai Sewa Singh has produced the

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<sup>41</sup> Gurbaksh Singh Shant, *Bhai Gurdās Diān Varān Da Alochanatmak Adhiain* (Patiala: Bhasha Vibhag, 2000).

<sup>42</sup> Piara Singh Padam, "Bhai Gurdas Di Hindi Rachna," in *Bhai Gurdas: Jivan Te Rachna*, ed. Kapur Singh Ghuman (Patiala: Bhasha Vibhag, 1983), 216.

<sup>43</sup> Gursharan Kaur Jaggi, ed., *Varān Bhai Gurdās (Punjabi)* (Patiala, India: Punjabi University, 1987). Oankar Singh, ed., *Kabitt Savaiyye Bhai Gurdas, Anukramanika Te Kosh* (Patiala: Punjabi University Publications Bureau, 1993).

<sup>44</sup> Gurmukh Singh, ed., *Bhai Gurdas: Sandarabh Kosh* (Patiala: Amarjit Singh Lamba, 2003), Svaranjit Singh, ed., *Bhai Gurdas Vicar Kosh* (Patiala: Ajit Singh Lamba, 2003).

<sup>45</sup> Singh, ed., *Kabitt Savaiyye Bhai Gurdas, Anukramanika Te Kosh*. Amritpal Kaur, *Shabad Anukramanika Te Kosh - Kabitt Savaiyye Bhai Gurdas* (Patiala: Punjabi University Publications Bureau, 1996). Rattan Singh Jaggi, *Varān Bhai Gurdās: Shabad-Anukramanika Ate Kosh* (Patiala: Punjabi University Press, 1966).

best Punjabi prose translations of Gurdas's Brajbhāshā works.<sup>46</sup> Jodh Singh of Punjabi University has released the most comprehensive translation of the vārs into prose English.<sup>47</sup> Before Jodh Singh's translations, Macauliffe, M. L. Peace, and others translated selections of the vārs into English.<sup>48</sup> In 2007, an English prose translation of the kabitts has been published for the first time.<sup>49</sup>

J. S. Grewal's essay, "Sikh Panth in the Vārs of Bhai Gurdas" is the most cohesive attempt to place Gurdas's project in context, and is a landmark in the English-language work on the Gurdas to date.<sup>50</sup> Grewal clearly recognizes Gurdas's importance as a writer, and treats his Punjabi works as historical sources. For Grewal, Gurdas is the "St. Paul of Sikhism" who "lived in a phase of Sikh history marked by crisis and transition".<sup>51</sup> Of the two existing books on Bhai Gurdas in English, Pritam Singh's brief book is the one more likely written for an

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<sup>46</sup> Bhai Sewa Singh, *Kabitt Savaiyye Bhai Gurdas Ji Saṭīk* (Amritsar: Singh Brothers, 2001).

<sup>47</sup> Gurdas Bhalla, *Bhai Gurdas: Text, Translation, and Translation*, trans. Jodh Singh, 2 vols. (Patiala, India: Vision & Venture, 1998).

<sup>48</sup> Max Arthur Macauliffe, *The Sikh Religion (Its Gurus, Sacred Writings and Authors)*, Reprint ed., Six vols. (Amritsar: Satvic Media Pvt. Ltd., 2000). *Bhai Gurdas's Vars: Vol. I (1-6) Pauries*, trans. M.L. Peace (Jalandar: M. L. Peace, 1960). W. H. McLeod, *Textual Sources for the Study of Sikhism, Textual Sources for the Study of Religion*; (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984). *Hymns from Bhai Gurdas's Compositions*, trans. Gobind Singh Mansukhani (Amritsar: Singh Brothers, 1996).

<sup>49</sup> *Kabitt Swayye Bhai Gurdas Ji*, trans. Shamsher Singh Puri (Amritsar: Singh Brothers, 2007), *Kabitt-Savaiyye Bhai Gurdas Ji*, trans. Pritpal Singh Bindra (Amritsar: Chattar Singh Jivan Singh, 2008).

<sup>50</sup> J. S. Grewal, "The Sikh Panth in the Vars of Bhai Gurdas," in *History and Ideology: The Khalsa over 300 Years* (New Delhi: Tulika, 1999), Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*.

<sup>51</sup> Grewal, "The Sikh Panth in the Vars of Bhai Gurdas," 26.



academic audience; his perspective is that of a literary historian.<sup>52</sup> After tracing Gurdas's life, Pritam Singh makes a case for Gurdas' influence on later Sikh writers as an innovator in Brajbhāshā literature, and in his attempt to found a new Sikh orthodoxy. *Bhai Gurdas Bhalla: The First Sikh Scholar* by retired civil servant Surinderjit Singh Pall was written for a Sikh religious audience. Pall's work is written in a question-answer format and uses as its basis the commentaries of Giani Narain Singh and Bhai Vir Singh. Pall lists out eight "tips for practicing Sikhism" as deduced from Gurdas's vārs, which are "born out of his divine love for the Sikh Gurus".<sup>53</sup>

### **This Dissertation on Gurdas's Career**

The present work consolidates the data about Gurdas's life and works, and advances the questions raised in previous literature. This work takes a cue from Grewal's historical treatment of Gurdas's vārs, expanding his methodology to the kabitts. It builds on Darshan Singh's positioning of Gurdas's writings as polemical tools for sectarian power, adding manuscript evidence, external sources like Miharban's works, and the compositions of Sikh writers (Satta, Balvand, Sundar, and the bhattis) whose project Gurdas continues. I advance Padam's close reading of Hindi texts as well as Grewal's dating of Gurdas's works to the seventeenth

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<sup>52</sup> Pritam Singh, *Bhai Gurdas, Makers of Indian Literature* (Sahitya Academy, 1992).

<sup>53</sup> Surinderjit Singh Pall, *Bhai Gurdas: The First Sikh Scholar* (Amritsar: Chattar Singh Jiwan Singh, 2002), 149, 94.

century. Whereas Deep's approach reinterprets Gurdas's works with a modern lense, my methodology is to understand Gurdas's writings in his own context.<sup>54</sup>

This dissertation refocuses the debate on Gurdas's own reasons for writing. I argue that the previous works on Gurdas's career assume much of the traditional depictions of his project, few of which are verifiable, many of which are incongruous amongst themselves and inconsistent with Gurdas's self-conception in his own writings. By revisiting traditional accounts in their chronological order, I am better able to assess their coloring of Gurdas's legacy, allowing for a clearer vision of his project to emerge.

Chapter One will help to assess the current understanding of Gurdas's life by tracing the development of his biography through history, from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries. Chapter Two will place Gurdas's works in the context of Sikh writing up until his lifetime, highlighting Gurdas's indebtedness to the tradition he inherited. Furthermore, this chapter will place the Punjabi vārs and the Brajbhāshā quatrains in the contexts of the respective literary traditions from which they emerged. This chapter will address one of the major problems posed in Chapter One—the correct dating of Gurdas's works—and will examine his purpose in writing.

After these introductions to Gurdas's life, literary context, and works, the dissertation will move to a critical examination of Gurdas's writings for their

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<sup>54</sup> Deep seems to overlook the fact that that Gurdas is writing between seven and nine decades after Nanak's death; therefore he is addressing issues that are important to that time, such as buttressing the legacy of Guru Hargobind, and for the morale of the 1600s tradition.

religious content, their legitimation of Sikh authority, and their response to the challenges Sikhs faced in the early seventeenth century — namely, state persecution, the death of their leader, and the threat of schism. Gurdas's literary contribution was influential in shaping Sikh identity and expressing Sikh political aspirations during a critical period in the tradition's history. I will identify the major themes of his expansive corpus, observing his creative reformulations of Sikh tradition, and placing his religious vision in the social, political, and sectarian context out of which it emerged.

Chapters Three and onward rest on the premise that Gurdas's writings served as a definitive source of information for Sikh life. In Chapter Three, I will lay out the core beliefs that Gurdas espouses in his writings, and examine how they functioned in community construction by providing believers "access to a reality to which outsiders had no access."<sup>55</sup> Chapter Four will apply this principle of investigation to the conduct codes and ethics that Gurdas advances in his works. It will answer the questions: what were Sikhs to do; and how were they to behave as Sikhs? Chapter Five will reconstruct early Sikh practices, and investigate Gurdas's theorization of those practices and the reasons Sikhs performed them. Chapter Six will continue the discussion of Gurdas's works as a source for early Sikh religious life with an emphasis on the contemporary problems about which he wrote, and how the ethic of benevolence informed Gurdas's vision of ultimate Sikh

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<sup>55</sup> Donald S. Lopez Jr., "Belief," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

ascendancy. The dissertation will conclude with an analysis of Gurdas's project and move towards an updated biography of this important Sikh.

Revisiting the earliest Sikh textual sources, this dissertation builds on some of the recent trends in early Sikh studies. Jeevan Deol has published an article on the Sikh splinter group with which this dissertation will put Gurdas in conversation.<sup>56</sup> Gurdas was the scribe for the Kartarpur Pothis, a landmark manuscript in Mann's study of Sikh scripture.<sup>57</sup> Whereas McLeod's recent work draws on Sikh codes of conduct from the eighteenth to twentieth centuries, this dissertation addresses the literature to which those codes look for authority.<sup>58</sup> Pashaura Singh's reconstruction of the life and works of Guru Arjan is based on early Sikh texts, including Gurdas's works.<sup>59</sup> Through this dissertation I hope to open new avenues of inquiry into seventeenth century dissent in the Sikh tradition; early Sikh hagiographical traditions; the expansion of Sikh literature; and the expansion of the Sikh community throughout the subcontinent.

My approach to the important Sikh texts of the seventeenth century is sensitive to Lawrence Sullivan's warning that religious texts are not the only form

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<sup>56</sup> Jeevan Deol, "The Minas and Their Literature," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 118, no. 2 (1998).

<sup>57</sup> Mann, *The Making of Sikh Scripture*.

<sup>58</sup> McLeod, *Sikhs of the Khalsa: A History of the Khalsa Rahit*.

<sup>59</sup> Singh, *Life and Work of Guru Arjan*.

of religious expression, but one of many to be considered.<sup>60</sup> However, texts have been the best sources for the reconstruction of early Sikh history—there are no sculptures or paintings from the early tradition; little architectural evidence is extant; and numismatic evidence is not salient to the Sikh case until at least the late seventeenth century. I use critical, historical methodology to examine Gurdas's compositions in their published editions, look closely for clues about religious performance and practice, locate beliefs and ethical ideals in their proper context, understand how Gurdas contributes to the definition of Sikh identity, and place Gurdas in conversation with other sources for early Sikh history.

At its heart, this is a dissertation about religion, religious community formation, and religious literature. My broader question is: what makes a religious tradition successful in mobilizing literature to meet its needs? How can religious literature both respond to short-term problems and yet become immemorialized in the long term? Furthermore, in this dissertation, I will bring to high relief a broader question: how can we see religious literature a resource mobilized by forward-thinking polemicists and commentators to maneuver their particular tradition through tough times.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Lawrence Sullivan, "Seeking and End to the Primary Text or Putting and End to the Text as Primary," in *Beyond the Classics: Essays in Religious Studies and Liberal Education*, ed. Frank E. Reynolds and Sheryl L. Burkhalter (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990).

<sup>61</sup> For example, Joseph Walser's recent work examines the work of an early Buddhist philosopher through the lens of Resource Mobilization theory. Joseph Walser, *Nagarjuna in Context: Mahayana Buddhism and Early Indian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

## Chapter One

### Sources for the Study of Gurdas's Career

Like an ox at an oil press imagines itself walking many miles  
    But removing its blinders reveals it standing in the same place  
Like a blind rope-maker twines away without care  
    But dismays when he finds a calf chewing away at his work  
Like a thirsty deer in a desert chases the mirage of oasis  
    But only wanders and strays in distress  
So has my life passed like a dream, wandering foreign lands  
    I never got to where I wanted to go  
    — Bhai Gurdas Bhalla, Kabitt 578

This chapter examines the extant data on Gurdas's life. Beginning with pre-modern sources' treatment of Gurdas, the chapter will end with a brief review of the early-twentieth century secondary literature on his works. By tracing the data for his life through the centuries, I hope to de-stabilize the accepted narratives and open new lines of inquiry to his biography. My second goal is to demonstrate how important Gurdas has been to the Sikh tradition for centuries: both as a community leader as well as in terms of his writings' importance in Sikh life.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In the mid-1800s, traditional Sikh texts were most abundant in their descriptions of the Gurus' lives, and, as a consequence, Gurdas's life as well. Thus, this period marks a central point in the information gathered on Gurdas's life and works, and as a result, modern scholarship relies—too heavily, I argue—on nineteenth century sources for information about his life. This is the last period when new ideas and episodes about Gurdas's life make their way into the Sikh literary record.

To provide a fresh perspective on the issue, this chapter builds an understanding of Gurdas's life on information from as far back in time as possible. Understanding Gurdas's importance in history from early Sikh sources to recent scholarship will help us re-evaluate the foundations of the current traditions of Gurdas's biography. I will show how Gurdas's work as a scribe was known soon after his passing, and how his reputation as a Sikh thinker and writer was widespread as early as the 1700s. From within a century after his death, Sikhs used his commentarial literature to help clarify Sikh beliefs. For centuries, Gurdas has been known in the tradition, not just for his textual work, but as well as for his role as a community leader: a confidante and servant of the fifth Guru, and one of the Sikhs who led the community at the ascension of the sixth Guru, Hargobind. The chapter will conclude with an assessment of what is at stake in the study of Gurdas's works, and justify this dissertation's critical re-examination of his life and legacy. Later in the dissertation, we will begin to lay out an updated biography of Gurdas based on the re-evaluation of a wide range of data. The earliest available data for Gurdas's life is where we begin.

### **Seventeenth Century Sources**

Outside of Gurdas's own compositions, three sets of 1600s sources may be helpful in the development of his biography. Here we consider data from early

scriptural manuscripts, bardic scrolls, and official Sikh epistles; the first of these are most reliable for our purposes. The earliest sources show that Gurdas is one of the first important Sikhs mentioned in Sikh literature, and the reverent title “Bhai” is applied to him shortly after his death, if not during his own lifetime.

A Sikh scriptural manuscript dated to 1692 provides the earliest evidence for the traditional Sikh view that Gurdas was the scribe for the Kartarpur Pothis, the landmark Sikh scriptural manuscript that was compiled in 1604. The 1692 manuscript’s colophon articulates its relationship to the “big book” (*vaḍā granth*) that Gurdas inscribed at the behest of the fifth Guru, which scholars deduce is the Kartarpur Pothis.<sup>2</sup> Scholars of the Sikh scriptural canon have studied the Kartarpur Pothis, and none of them report any internal data that explicitly links this manuscript with Gurdas. The Kartarpur Pothis is currently in the custody of the Sodhis of Kartarpur (Punjab, India), includes 974 folios of scriptural text, and a dated colophon.<sup>3</sup> There is no evidence to contradict the tradition of Gurdas being the primary scribe of Kartarpur Pothis. Two important scholars of Sikh scripture, Bhai Jodh Singh and Gurinder Singh Mann, both report from their extensive study of this manuscript, that its table of contents and body text were inscribed and dated

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<sup>2</sup> Jeevan Deol, “Non-Canonical Compositions Attributed to the Seventh and Ninth Sikh Gurus,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 121, no. 2 (2001): 195. Gurinder Singh Mann includes this manuscript, which is referred to as the Patna Pothis or the Ram Rai Pothis, among the important, early manuscripts of the Sikh sacred text. See Mann, *The Making of Sikh Scripture*, 72.

<sup>3</sup> A summary of the contents of the Pothis has been published: Jodh Singh, *Sri Kartarpuri Bir De Darshan* (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1968).



by the same hand. Furthermore, they report that later, a different scribe added dated additions to the text after Gurdas's lifetime.<sup>4</sup>

Second, we consider the *bhaṭṭ vahīs*, patronized scrolls maintained by professional bards associated with the courts of the Sikh Gurus. The reliability of these records as sources of Sikh history is disputed, but may prove help in the reconstruction of Gurdas's life. They may be based on near-contemporary sources, and scholars may have much to gain from considering them.<sup>5</sup> According to Piara Singh Padam's research on these sources, these records mention by name one "Gurdas, son of Ishardas Bhalla" as one of the companions of Guru Hargobind in the first quarter of the seventeenth century.<sup>6</sup> One of these records, known as *bhaṭṭ*

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<sup>4</sup> Death dates of the Gurus recorded on folio 25 are of different scribes: the dates of the first five Gurus are in the hand of the primary scribe, written at the same time, after 1606. The death dates of Baba Gurditta (sixth Guru's son, who pre-deceased his father) and Guru Hargobind are from a different hand. The first scribe wrote the colophon: *sambat 1661 mitī bhādon vadi ekam 1 pothī likhe pahuche* ("Have written the Pothi... reached on the first day of the increasing phase of the moon in the month of Bhadon, year 1661"). Please see Ibid. For a detailed treatment of this manuscript, its history, and its implications for Sikh scripture, please see Mann, *The Making of Sikh Scripture*, 59-68.

<sup>5</sup> Sikh researcher Giani Garja Singh gathered some copies of these sources in the middle of the twentieth century, and some of these are available in the archives of the Punjabi University at Patiala ("bhaṭṭ vahis" by Giani Garja Singh Harbans Singh, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Sikhism*, Fourth ed., 4 vols., vol. 1 (Patiala: Punjabi University, 2002), 353-4.). Darshan Singh articulates the position of Sikh historians about how the *bhaṭṭ vahīs* challenge our 1700s and 1800s sources: "If we take the *bhaṭṭ vahīs* as the last word on these dates, then we will have to accept that by this date Guru Hargobind had fought five battles and was living in Kiratpur. If this is true, and the dates are reliable, and on this basis we will have to reconsider the information in our old books like *Gurbilās Patshahi Chevīn*, *Sri Gur Pratap Suraj Granth*, *Tvarikh Guru Khalsa*, etc." (Singh, *Bhai Gurdas: Sikhī De Pahile Viākhīākār*, 33.)

<sup>6</sup> For excerpts from the Talaunda Pargana Jind and Multani Sindhi *bhaṭṭ vahīs* please see Swarup Singh Kaushish, *Guru Kīān Sākhīān*, ed. Piara Singh Padam, Fifth ed. (Amritsar: Singh Brothers, 2003), 30-1.

*vahī* Talaunda Pargana Jind, provides a death date for Gurdas that corresponds with the year 1636 CE.<sup>7</sup> According to Darshan Singh, author of a recent Punjabi monograph on Gurdas, this date is corroborated in a copy of a scriptural manuscript at Gurdas's hometown of Goindval (Punjab).<sup>8</sup>

Finally, we should note that the name “Gurdas” is mentioned in a few extant, but undated, *hukamanāmās* (official letters) from the sixth Guru (d. 1644) and from the son of the sixth Guru, Baba Gurditta (d. 1638).<sup>9</sup> In one such letter from Guru Hargobind to an unspecified Sikh congregation far to the east of Punjab, the Guru tells the congregation that they should follow Gurdas (*gurdās nāl lāg rahiṇā*). In another *hukamnāmā* the Guru addresses “the congregation of the east” (*pūrab dī sangat*) and requests one Bhai Gurdas and one Bhai Japu to celebrate a *gurpurab* (holiday associated with the Gurus' lives) together from which the cash collected will contribute to the Guru's coffers. If the authenticity of these *hukamanamas*, and the certainty of their reference to Bhai Gurdas Bhalla, could be corroborated, these pieces of evidence would open substantial lines of inquiry into

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<sup>7</sup> A transliteration of the text goes: *bhai gurdas beṭā īsar dās bhalle kā bāsi goindvāl sāl 1693 bhādon sudi pancamī vīrvār ke dehun ek gharī divas caṛe suās pūre hoe. age guru ki gati guru jāṇe. guru guru jāp na*. The excerpt is from *bhaṭṭ vahī* Talaunda Pargana Jind, Sikh Dharam Vishavakosh, from the collections of Punjabi University, Patiala). Singh, *Bhai Gurdas: Sikhī De Pahile Viākhīākār*, 33.

<sup>8</sup> A transliteration of the text goes: *sammat 1693 bhādvā sudi pancamī din vīravār ek gharī dehu caṛe bhai gurdaas ji samāṇe goindval me*. Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ganda Singh, ed., *Hukamnāme Guru Sāhibān, Mata Sāhibān, Bandā Singh Ate Khālsa Jī De* (Patiala: Punjabi University Publications Bureau, 1999).

the later part of Gurdas's life.<sup>10</sup>

## **Eighteenth Century**

An important Sikh code of conduct, dated to 1700, corroborates Gurdas's scribal role in the first extant narrative about him.<sup>11</sup> In a story in the *Hazūrī Rahitnāma* ("Code of Conduct," sometimes referred to by the name of its author, Chaupa Singh Chhibbar), Guru Arjan blesses and commissions Gurdas to create a distinct Sikh scriptural manuscript for two reasons: (1) because sectarian rivals were composing poetry and passing it off as Sikh scripture, and (2) in order to make the Sikh religion distinct from Hinduism and Islam.<sup>12</sup> Another reference to Gurdas, at the end of the *Rahitnāmā*, quotes Gurdas's Kabitt 503 when discussing

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<sup>10</sup> We know of another Gurdas who lived in the later seventeenth century and was an important Sikh of a schismatic group. ["Bhai Gurdas," by Rattan Singh Jaggi in Harbans Singh, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Sikhism*, Fourth ed., 4 vols., vol. 2 (Patiala: Punjabi University, 2002), 138-40.] Also, an important vār of the eighteenth century is attributed to one Bhai Gurdas Singh. [Please See *Rāmkalī kī vār Patshahi Dasvīn Dī* in Giani Hazara Singh and Bhai Vir Singh, *Varān Bhai Gurdās Satīk* (New Delhi: Bhai Vir Singh Press, 2002), 636-50.]. The fact that later Sikh traditional sources (eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) allege that Gurdas spent an extended period of time in places like Agra and Benares (Varanasi), have led at least one Sikh writer to identify the Gurdas in these letters with Bhai Gurdas Bhalla. [Please see Singh and Singh, *Varān Bhai Gurdās Satīk*, 12-16.] However, given the popularity of the name "Gurdas" in Sikh circles, I think we need further corroborating evidence.

<sup>11</sup> McLeod dates the *Rahitnāmā* to the mid-eighteenth century, but other scholars argue for much earlier dates. Chaupa Singh, *The Chaupa Singh Rahit-Nama*, ed. W. H. McLeod (Otago: University of Otago Press, 1987). See also Chaupa Singh Chibbar, "Rahitnāmā Hazūrī," in *Rahitnāma*, ed. Piara Singh Padam (Amritsar: Singh Brothers, 2000).; and Gurinder Singh Mann, "Five Hundred Years of the Sikh Educational Heritage," in *Five Centuries of Sikh Tradition: Ideology, Society, Politics and Culture*, ed. Reeta Grewal and Sheena Pall (New Delhi: Manohar, 2005), 365.

<sup>12</sup> Singh, *The Chaupa Singh Rahit-Nama*, 92, Pauri 249. That Guru Arjan compiled a scriptural manuscript in response to sectarian writings seems historically inaccurate, please See: Mann, *The Making of Sikh Scripture*, 36.

sin and the Guru's forgiveness.<sup>13</sup> This quotation makes the *Rahitnāmā* one of two eighteenth century texts to quote from Gurdas's kabitts, the other being the *Mahimā Prakāsh*, which is dated to 1776 and discussed below.

From a genealogy of Gurdas's uncle and third Guru, Amardas, in Kesar Singh Chhibbar's 1769 *Bansāvalīnāmā Dasān Pātshāhīān Kā* ("Genealogy of the Ten Kings"), we can extrapolate Gurdas's family tree.<sup>14</sup> Gurdas was the son of Ishardas Bhalla (corroborating evidence from the *bhaṭṭ vahīs*), who was the youngest son of Chandan Bhan Bhalla, brother of Guru Amardas's father, Tej Bhan Bhalla. Chhibbar emphasizes that Bhai Gurdas was the scribe of the Ad Granth,<sup>15</sup> and adds to Chaupa Singh's assertion that Guru Arjan had Gurdas compile the sacred text on learning that his rival brother Prithi Chand's sect had begun to add their own poetry to the Sikh corpus.<sup>16</sup> *Bansāvalīnāmā* adds considerable depth to our image of Gurdas by depicting him as a leading figure in the Sikh community:

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<sup>13</sup> *Paurī* 646, Singh, *The Chaupa Singh Rahit-Nama*, 131. This is part of an undated addendum to the *Rahitnama*, which nonetheless belongs to the eighteenth century.

<sup>14</sup> Kesar Singh Chhibbar, *Bansāvalīnāmā Dasān Pātshāhīān Kā*, ed. Piara Singh Padam (Amritsar: Singh Brothers, 1997), 62, 81.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 232, 45. Chhibbar refers to Gurdas as "nanny" (*khiḍāvā*) of the Sikh sacred text. Chhibbar uses the same term to refer to his ancestor Chaupa Singh (whose *Rahitnāmā* is discussed above) who helped raise the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh. Perhaps in naming Gurdas a "*khiḍāvā*" also, he is expressing his claim for the eleventh and eternal Guruship of the Granth.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 92-3. According to Chhibbar, Guru Arjan's nephew, Miharban, had learned a number of languages, began to spurious poetry under the name "Nanak," and created a book that included the four other Gurus' compositions in it. The historical accuracy of this assertion and its chronology is questionable.

Guru Arjan knew of his impending martyrdom and entrusts Gurdas with the protection of young Guru Hargobind and the community;<sup>17</sup> Gurdas dissuades Guru Hargobind from arranging a meeting with the Mughal Emperor.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, Chhibbar provides an explanation for why the historical record does not register the existence of Gurdas's offspring: he was cursed to be without issue after calling the Guru's brother and his followers *mīṇās* ("scoundrels") in his writings.<sup>19</sup>

The 1776 text *Mahimā Prakāśh* ("Dawn of Glory") is attributed to Sarup Das Bhalla, of the same clan as Gurdas, and portrays the poet as having a considerably greater role in the lives of the Gurus than any previous source.<sup>20</sup> First, Gurdas enters the *Mahimā Prakāśh* narrative as a leader of the Agra Sikh community, is portrayed as possessing miraculous powers.<sup>21</sup> Bhalla adds a second new element to the narrative of Gurdas's life, articulating that Gurdas played the

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 84-5.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 91-2.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 81-2. This is highly unlikely, but is an interesting attempt on Chhibbar's part to explain several phenomena together: the fact that there is no record of Gurdas being a father, the rivalry between Prithi Chand and his brother Guru Arjan, and Guru Arjan's execution at the hands of the Mughals. Chhibbar's development of Gurdas as a historical agent is noteworthy, however, his chronology is suspect.

<sup>20</sup> It is likely that the 1776 *Mahima Prakash* was based on an earlier prose version attributed to Kirpal Das Bhalla. I am grateful to Lou Fenech for a personal conversation about the *Mahima Prakash* tradition. Please see Kulwinder Singh Bajwa's edition, especially pages 115-138, which include the narratives about Gurdas. Kirpal Das Bhalla, *Māhimā Prakāśh (Vārtak)*, ed. Kulwinder Singh Bajwa (Amritsar: Singh Brothers, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> In Bhalla's narrative, Gurdas brings the entire Sikh congregation from Agra with him to see Guru Arjan at the Sikh center of Amritsar, on the way invoking the Guru's name to miraculously carry the group across a river.

part of amanuensis of Sikh scripture, in addition to scribe.<sup>22</sup> Finally, the *Mahimā Prakāsh* commences what becomes a well-known tradition about Gurdas being tested by the Guru, which I will refer to throughout this dissertation as the “*guru-svāṅg* episode” (episode about the Guru’s guise). Well into the nineteenth century, Sikh historical writers elaborate on this story, modifying its details considerably.<sup>23</sup> In the *Mahimā Prakāsh* version of the story, Gurdas runs away during Guru Arjan’s pontificate, but is found and brought home during the reign of his successor, Guru Hargobind (this detail changes in later versions of the story). Gurdas returns to the Guru’s court with 700 new converts to the tradition from the land to which he had escaped, and where he was preaching the Sikh message. The Guru is

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<sup>22</sup> In Bhalla’s narrative, Guru Arjan decides to create a holy book for the Sikh community (absent in this telling is the pressure from rival sectarian groups that was there in the Chhibbar version), and he requests Gurdas to collect all the scriptural texts of the Sikh tradition. Guru Arjan charges Gurdas with adding the compositions of the Bhagats (from *bhakta* for “devotee”, those pre-Sikh writers whose compositions are enshrined in Sikh scripture), retrieving important Sikh manuscripts, and distinguishing authentic compositions from spurious attributions. Guru Arjan tests Gurdas’s certainty about the inauthentic nature of particular compositions, and Gurdas testifies that he knows the words of his master like a wife knows her husband’s voice. Sarup Das Bhalla adds further detail to the process of the compilation of the Kartarpur Pothe in a story about the Bhagat bāṇī. When transcribing the Bhagat bāṇī, Gurdas is struck with doubt as to its authenticity until Guru Arjan introduces him to a line-up of Bhagats who are advocating for their bāṇī to be included in this great Granth. [Sarup Das Bhalla, *Māhimā Prakāsh Bhāg Dūja*, ed. Uttam Singh Bhatia, vol. 1 (Patiala: Bhasha Vibhag, 2003), 348-50, 57-8.]

<sup>23</sup> In Sarup Das Bhalla’s narration, Guru Arjan decides to teach Gurdas a lesson after hearing a particular stanza from Gurdas’s vārs that Bhalla interprets as saying that a Sikh should not lose faith if the Guru deceives him via a sham, or *svāṅg*. The excerpt in question corresponds to stanza 35.20 in the vārs. The Guru’s trick involves sending Gurdas to pay for horses the Guru has purchased, but Gurdas does not know the supposed bag of coins that make up the payment is actually full of potsherds. When, en route to make the payment, Gurdas realizes he has only broken pottery in his bag, he panics, flees, and settles in a far way land (*dūr des*). In this anonymous land he takes the guise of a renunciate, and takes on preaching of the Sikh tradition to the locals. This story may explain the mid-nineteenth century portrait of Gurdas described by biographer Rattan Singh Jaggi, which depicts him as a yogi. Please see discussion below and Jaggi, *Bhai Gurdas: Jivan Te Rachna*, 21.

superbly pleased with this and forgives Gurdas his trespasses after Gurdas presents a revised version of the stanza that had offended Guru Arjan.<sup>24</sup> At that point, Gurdas presents five kabitts, which also appear in Sarup Das Bhalla's text; marking the second time an eighteenth century text quotes Gurdas's Brajbhāshā works.<sup>25</sup>

*Sikhān Dī Bhagatmālā* ("Garland of Sikh-saints," hereafter, *Bhagatmālā*) is a late eighteenth century work, credited to Surat Singh, a Nirmala scholar, which represents a change of trajectory in the treatment of Gurdas's works in Sikh tradition.<sup>26</sup> *Bhagatmālā* provides prose annotations to Gurdas's Vār 11, which is

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<sup>24</sup> In place of the offensive stanza, v35.20, and the new stanza is v35.22.

<sup>25</sup> The first was the Chaupa Singh Rahitnama, described above. Also of interest is that one of the kabitts that Bhalla includes here does not match up with the 675 extant kabitts attributed to Gurdas, and could either belong to another writer, or come from another tradition of poetry once attributed to Gurdas. The narrative closes with the Guru's exuberance about Gurdas, and the author includes the following couplet, in the theme of redemption:

"That Sikh who confronts the commentary (*kathā*) of Gurdas, and listens to it with all his mind (*chit*),

The Guru finds a fixed (*dariṛe*) place in his heart, with surety (*nishchiā*), and he attains the Stage of Perfection (*param pad*) in the end."

This and all subsequent translations are my own. Note that the param pad is a metaphor used frequently by Gurdas in the kabitts, showing again that this author knows Gurdas's writings well. This is a significant statement for it provides the first explicit mention of the place Gurdas's commentarial text in Sikh tradition, providing the paradigm for how later Sikh sources characterize Gurdas's works. [Sarup Das Bhalla, *Māhimā Prakāsh Bhāg Dūja*, ed. Uttam Singh Bhatia, vol. 2 (Patiala: Bhasha Vibhag, 2003), 459-65.]

<sup>26</sup> In the text itself, the commentary is attributed to the important eighteenth century Sikh Mani Singh, who died over half a century before it is dated. The text claims that it is a product of the tenth Sikh Guru, Gobind Singh, fulfilling a request by Mani Singh to know more about the early Sikh community. The Nirmalas are a sect of ascetic Sikhs whose adherents have contributed a number of interpretive works and life narratives to Sikh literature. For more information about the debates regarding this attribution please see the standard critical edition of the text, edited by

significant for providing a list of the names of important Sikhs dating back to Guru Nanak's original community; it also focuses on the distilled version of Sikh beliefs that were put forth over a century before by Gurdas; it provides extensive stories about the Sikhs mentioned in Gurdas's Vār.<sup>27</sup> *Bhagatmālā* reports, like Chaupa Singh's and Kesar Singh Chhibbar's *Bansāvalīnāmā*, that Guru Arjan commissioned Gurdas *Rahitnāmā* to compile the Granth because some Sikhs had doubts about the authenticity of some compositions.<sup>28</sup> More importantly, though, the *Bhagatmālā* reports that after the compilation of a new scriptural manuscript ends the debate about spurious compositions of the schismatic groups, Sikhs ask the Guru how they should consider Gurdas's writings: "are we to read them or not?" The Guru responds:

The fools (referring to schismatics) have written their words out of family jealousy (*sarīkā*) and have not taken the refuge of the Guru's word, and we have forbidden their writings. Moreover, Bhai [Gurdas] Ji's writings are the commentary (*tīkā*) on my words, and from them

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Trilochan Singh Bedi *Sikhan Di Bhagatmala*, ed. Tarlochan Singh Bedi (Patiala: Punjabi University Publications Bureau, 1994).

<sup>27</sup> Vār 11 organizes lists of Gurdas's contemporary Sikhs by their geographical location and testifies to the expansion of the Sikh community throughout the northern portion of the subcontinent, representing the first time historical Sikhs became subjects of literature.

<sup>28</sup> *Bhagatmālā* adds that Gurdas was chosen to compile the Sikh scripture because of his deep knowledge of it. He collected scriptural compositions at his own home, re-transcribed them in Gurmukhi script, and played a role in collecting disparate manuscripts. *Bhagatmālā* builds on the brief story in *Mahimā Prakāsh* about the inclusion of Bhagat-bāṇī in the Adi Granth. In the *Bhagatmālā* version, Kabir and the Bhagats bring their compositions to Gurdas for inclusion, saying "This fifth Veda has come in the Dark Age, please put our writings in it...." Gurdas solicits permission from Guru Arjan on behalf of the saints, but the Guru rejects all their compositions and requires them to rewrite fresh poetry for the Granth. *Sikhan Di Bhagatmala*, 122-3.



discipleship (*sikhī*) is obtained (*prāpat*). God's heart is the Vedas and the Guru's heart is the word. Whoever are the Sikhs whose hearts are united with the word, you may read their words.<sup>29</sup>

This is another clear statement attesting the fundamental importance of Gurdas's writings in eighteenth century Sikh life, and that Gurdas's works were considered second only to Sikh scripture.<sup>30</sup>

A final eighteenth century text that deserves mention here, because it is also an extended commentary on one of Gurdas's vārs, is the *janam-sākhī* ("life-story") attributed to Bhai Mani Singh, an important Sikh scribe and community leader who was executed in 1738.<sup>31</sup> Known as the *Giān Ratanāvalī* ("Garland of Knowledge") or *Mani Singh Janam-Sākhī*, this text is a complex collection of stories about Guru Nanak, taking as its foundation hagiographical stanzas in Gurdas's Vār1, and adding commentary on Guru Nanak's own compositions. Although scant on information about Gurdas himself, this text, like the above-discussed *Bhagatmālā*, further

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>30</sup> Again, it is important to note that the *Bhagatmālā*, like the *Bansāvalīnāmā* and *Mahimā Prakāsh* before it, assumes that Gurdas had begun writing before the death of Guru Arjan.

<sup>31</sup> *Puratan Janam Sakhi Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji*, ed. Gurpratap Singh, Second ed. (Amritsar: Chattar Singh Jivan Singh, 1999). Along with this Janam Sakhi, to which a more specific date has not yet been attributed, at least two other texts (*Sikhān Dī Bhagatmālā*, discussed above, and *Gurbilās Pātshāhī Chevīn*, discussed below) are attributed to him or to his inspiration from later in history. According to McLeod, the extant text of *Janam-Sākhī Mani Singh* came to its current form sometime in the nineteenth century, but the core text may belong to the eighteenth century McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition : A Study of the Janam-Sakhis*, 37-9. Trilochan Singh, editor of *Sikhān Dī Bhagatmālā*, says that this text was committed to writing by Surat Singh (to whom the above-discussed *Bhagatmālā* is also attributed) during the 1730s. Because of the author's reference to Guru Nanak's revelation being the fifth Veda, it is possible to induce that the Janam Sakhi Mani Singh is from a Nirmala writer like Surat Singh. *Sikhān Dī Bhagatmālā*, 14-5, 4.

underscores the foundational importance of Gurdas's works in eighteenth century Sikh literature.<sup>32</sup> The prologue of *Mani Singh Janam-Sākhī* implies that Gurdas wrote his First Vār during Guru Arjan's lifetime, in response to *janam-sākhīs* having been written by the *mīṇā* rivals of Guru Arjan.<sup>33</sup>

Sarup Singh Kaushish's *Guru Kīān Sākhīān* ("Stories of the Guru," 1790) is a prose text that compiles various historical anecdotes from *bhaṭṭ vahīs*, the prose records kept by the author's bard ancestors for patrons, which included the Gurus.<sup>34</sup> Of the 112 extant narratives in this source, only one mention of Bhai Gurdas Bhalla appears: along with the famous Sikh Baba Budha, and three other named Sikhs, Gurdas is said to have visited Guru Hargobind during his imprisonment at Gwalior, which scholars date to around 1610.<sup>35</sup> Just as interesting

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<sup>32</sup> This text seems to me comparable to Hadith literature from Islamic traditions, where traditional stories of the prophet are linked together through a chain of transmission.

<sup>33</sup> *Puratan Janam Sakhi Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji*, 9. Like Chhibbar's discussion of the *mīṇās*, discussed above, this view of Gurdas's works and those of the *mīṇās* is anachronistic. It is more reasonable to think that the *mīṇā* literature, attributed to Sodhi Miharban, would have been written after the time of Guru Arjan's death in 1606. As I argue elsewhere in this dissertation, Gurdas's works also come from the period after Guru Arjan's death.

<sup>34</sup> According to the editor of the latest edition of *Guru Kīān Sākhīān*, Piara Singh Padam, the extant work is probably only a latter half of the original document. Padam notes that the extant version of *Guru Kīān Sākhīān* contains no introductory invocation (*mangalācharaṇ*) and begins in 1635, at Kiratpur towards the end of the sixth Guru's life. Please see: Kaushish, *Guru Kīān Sākhīān*.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 39. Another person named Gurdas is mentioned often in the *Guru Kīān Sākhīān* stories, but this is clearly a different figure who lives late into the seventeenth century and an important follower of a rival claimant to the Sikh Guruship. See the above discussion about the hukamnāmās attributed to Guru Hargobind and Baba Gurditta. Gurdas Bhalla is distinguished from this person as being "from Punjab". This namesake figure is said to have been a follower of the schismatic Sodhi, Baba Ram Rai, and Ram Rai is treated with great regard in Kaushish's text. Ram Rai is often referred to as Karta Purakh, a popular Sikh epithet for the one God. I believe the reason for this

as this detail about Gurdas's travel to Gwalior is the text's identification of one "Haridas Daroga" (Haridas, the jailor) as a Sikh in the city of Gwalior, indeed a custodian of the jail in which Guru Hargobind was imprisoned, and a Sikh whom Gurdas and other Sikhs met regularly. This Haridas was a "Sikh of the Guru" and gave the Guru vital information to help facilitate his release from the Gwalior jail.<sup>36</sup> "Haridas Sohni" is one of the Sikh residents of Gwalior whom Gurdas mentions in his Vār 11, which details the followers of Guru Hargobind in various locales (v11.30).

### Nineteenth Century Sources

Sikhs, for centuries now, have pointed outsiders to Gurdas to help explain their religion. In his footnotes as well as in the body of the text, Malcolm provides loose translations from Gurdas's First Vār on the history of the Gurus.<sup>37</sup> Forty-seven years later, J. D. Cunningham also mentions Gurdas's life and work as part of

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reverence and knowledge of Ram Rai's followers may be because some of Kaushish's *bhaṭṭ vahī* sources come from records kept for this schismatic leader.

<sup>36</sup> Note also that the *bhaṭṭ vahī* Jadobansian Barhtian ki mentions Hariram Daroga celebrates Guru Hargobind's release from the jail, which the text dates to 1619, with lighting of candles (*dīpmālā*). The Guru spent one night at this man's house before moving on to Agra (probably on his way back to Punjab) Ibid., 30.

<sup>37</sup> John Malcolm, *Sketch of the Sikhs; a Singular Nation Who Inhabit the Provinces of the Penjab, Situated between the Rivers Jumna and Indus* (London: James Moyes, 1812), 30, 35, 152-61.

his treatment of the lives of the fifth and sixth Guru's in *History of the Sikhs*.<sup>38</sup>

In the mid-nineteenth century, as part of its treatment of the lives of the Sikh Gurus, *Gurbilās Patshahi Chevīn* ("The Splendor of the Sixth King," 1840s, hereafter *Gurbilās*) provides the first narrative account of Gurdas's death, and a 1629 death date that is seven years earlier than recorded in the above-discussed *bhaṭṭ vahīs*.<sup>39</sup> *Gurbilās* shares the above-discussed *Bhagatmālā*'s positions on Gurdas's work as amanuensis for the Sikh scripture, and builds on earlier depictions by comparing Guru Arjan and Gurdas with the mythological Lord Brahma and his legendary scribe Ganesh, respectively.<sup>40</sup> *Gurbilās* adds substantively to Gurdas's portrayal as a community leader, and adds to *Mahimā Prakāsh*'s mystical portrayal of Gurdas's personality: he is one of the deceased figures (the rest are

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<sup>38</sup> Joseph Davey Cunningham, *History of the Sikhs: From the Origin of the Nation to the Battles of the Sutlej*, ed. Patwant Singh (New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2008; reprint, Eighth), 51-2.

<sup>39</sup> *Gurbilās Pātshāhī Chevīn*, ed. Gurmukh Singh (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1997), 686. *Gurbilās* is an anonymous text, dedicated to providing historical background to the reign of Guru Hargobind and his legacy. *Gurbilās*'s testimony should be taken particularly seriously because the text itself claims an early eighteenth century date of compilation. For more information about issues surrounding the dating of the text and its authorship, please see Gurmukh Singh's introduction to the Punjabi University critical edition.

<sup>40</sup> Other than discussing Gurdas's role in the manuscript's compilation the *Gurbilās* significantly alters the story of the compilation process by suggesting that Gurdas added nine var tunes to the Granth on behest of Guru Hargobind. *Gurbilās* also includes a story very similar to the one told in *Sikhān Dī Bhagatmālā* about the Bhagat-bāṇī and Gurdas: when Gurdas has some worry about including the works of non-Sikh saints, the Bhagats mystically appear to Gurdas. [Ibid., 89, 90, 124, 28, 257.] According to Gurinder Singh Mann, the author of the *Gurbilās* endorses "the view that the creation of a Sikh text by Guru Arjan resulted from his attempt to prevent contamination of the Sikh gurus' compositions by those of the Minas". Thus, the author of the *Gurbilās* and Bhai Santokh Singh, author of *Gur Pratāp Suraj Granth*, both of Nirmala background, hold a position slightly different than *Mahimā Prakāsh*'s Sarup Das Bhalla who saw the sacred book as a "characteristically ... Sikh document". [Mann, *The Making of Sikh Scripture*, 23.]

Gurus and Mardana, Guru Nanak's legendary companion) who appear to the important Sikh Bidhi Chand at the moment before his death.<sup>41</sup>

*Gurbilās*'s account of the dates of Gurdas's compositions is significant because it dissents from other accounts in Sikh literature. The lack of the sources' consensus on this issue will be again considered below, in our discussion of dating Gurdas's compositions. The *Gurbilās*'s unique position is that Gurdas was commissioned to write his works by Guru Arjan after the 1604 compilation of the Poṭhi.<sup>42</sup> The story thates that after Guru Arjan and Gurdas finalize the Granth's contents, the Guru asks his scribe to enter his own compositions in the Granth. From the language used here, it does not seem that the compositions had already been written, but rather that Guru Arjan is asking Gurdas to compose. Gurdas humbly recuses himself three times, and finally Guru confers a boon on the reluctant Gurdas: his compositions will remain matchless (*apar apār*), will become the commentary on the Granth, and upon reading Gurdas's works the reader's pains will depart. Whosoever reads Gurdas with his heart will find Sikh

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<sup>41</sup> Though many in number, most inclusions of Gurdas in the narrative are minor. However, *Gurbilās*' author imagined him to be a very important Sikh, and a nearly constant companion of the Sikh Gurus. For examples: Gurdas and Baba Budha are the only two Sikhs mentioned by name who come to take audience with the (infant?) Guru Hargobind. At important occasions Gurdas and Baba Budha appear together in the *Gurbilās* retellings. The two assist Guru Hargobind with the building of the Akal Takht – Guru Hargobind's political throne. *Gurbilās* also narrates a "flashback" into the life of Guru Amardas. [*Gurbilās Pātshāhī Chevīn*, 55, 115, 18, 33, 43, 54, 55, 74, 76, 845.]

<sup>42</sup> Darshan Singh argues that a canto three (*paurī* 30-35) reference indicates that Gurdas's works were written earlier, but I differ with his reading. [See Singh, *Bhai Gurdas: Sikhī De Pahile Viākhīākār*, 39-42.] See also Canto 17 *paurīs* 288-90 where, well into the seventeenth century, Guru Hargobind commands Gurdas to compile his own works. *Gurbilās Pātshāhī Chevīn*, 80, 629.

discipleship (*sikhī*, very much a reflection of the late 1700s *Bhagatmālā* position).

Guru Arjan then asks Gurdas to create (*racho*) 40 vārs and 556 kabitts.<sup>43</sup>

Rattan Singh Bhangu's *Srī Gur Panth Prakāsh* ("Rise of the Holy Community-Guru") includes no reference to Gurdas's life, but does mention that aspect of his writings that inspired the *guru-svāṅ* story about Gurdas buying horses in Kabul. Unlike the interpretations of Sarup Das Bhalla, writer of *Mahimā Prakāsh* and subsequent writers, Bhangu interprets the verse that previous writers deemed questionable without any of the drama of the above-described horse-trading story.<sup>44</sup> Bhangu's use of the verse is significant because it provides a distinct interpretation of poetry that elsewhere elicited some of the most popular, but historiographically suspect, hagiographical accounts of Gurdas's life.

Bhai Santokh Singh's expansive interpretation of Sikh history, *Gurpratāp Sūraj Granth* ("Radiant Majesty of the Guru," 1843) provides dramatized accounts about the lives of the Sikh Gurus and their associates, including Gurdas. Like the *Gurbilās*, Santokh Singh's text portrays Gurdas as having an even more important

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<sup>43</sup> This is further significant because it is the first external statement about the number of Gurdas's works. The number of the kabitts at 556 was accurate for its time, as the final 119 are not added to Gurdas's corpus until the early twentieth century. *Gurbilās Pātshāhī Chevīn*, 145.

<sup>44</sup> In Bhangu's story, the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh had a powerful sword prepared and sharpened to test the faithfulness of his Sikhs, and their readiness for martyrdom. He asked for five Sikhs to offer themselves for beheading. The Sikhs who did not run away were rewarded for having passed this test of faith. Bhangu uses Gurdas's "*guru-svāṅ*" verses to explain the merciful Guru's play. Rattan Singh Bhangu, *Srī Gur Panth Prakāsh*, ed. Balwant Singh Dhillon (Amritsar: Singh Brothers, 2004), 172.

role in carrying the Sikh tradition through the tough times of sectarian schism and external interference in Sikh affairs, and in seeing the tradition through financial challenges.<sup>45</sup> Santokh Singh follows the received tradition in saying that reading Gurdas's works advances a Sikh's religious pursuits.<sup>46</sup> The most striking features of Santokh Singh's account of Gurdas's life are the six Sanskrit poems that he presents, for the first time in history, and attributes to Gurdas. Early twentieth century scholar Bhai Vir Singh has treated these in depth, and I briefly discuss them in the next chapter.<sup>47</sup>

The mid-nineteenth century marks another development in the Sikh tradition's portrayal of Gurdas: he becomes one of the first lay Sikh artistic subjects. Rattan Singh Jaggi reports the existence of a portrait of Gurdas from this period still extant in Benares. He describes a thin, aged, white-clad Gurdas sitting under a canopy in the yogic lotus posture, a rosary in his right hand, his left hand on his knee, a monk's cord around his waist and a halo around his head.<sup>48</sup> Jeevan

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<sup>45</sup> Santokh Singh introduces new stories about Gurdas: for example, Gurdas helps make sure offerings for the Guru go into the Guru's coffers. He says that Gurdas was sent to Agra by the fourth Guru, and returned to Amritsar on hearing of the Guru's death. Santokh Singh, *Sri Gurpratap Suraj Granth*, ed. Vir Singh, 14 vols. (Patiala: Bhasha Vibhag, 1989), 1753, 55-63, 00, 50.

<sup>46</sup> Transliteration: *padat sunat gur sikhī prāpat*. Ibid., 2120-1.

<sup>47</sup> Please see also Santokh Singh's translation of a *savaiyyā* that he attributes to Gurdas, that is not part of extant collections of Gurdas's works. Ibid., 3057-61, 70. Gurdas Bhalla, *Kabitt Bhai Gurdas: Dusra Skand Satīk*, ed. Vir Singh (Amritsar: Khalsa Samachar, 1980).

<sup>48</sup> Jaggi, *Bhai Gurdas: Jīvan Te Rachna*, 21.

Deol reports having seen a portrait of Gurdas with Guru Arjan and another Sikh scribe dated to 1844.<sup>49</sup> A mid-century portrait of Gurdas is available in the Moti Bagh collection at Patiala.<sup>50</sup>

### Early Twentieth Century Sources

The colonial period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries marks a major shift in the treatment of Gurdas's life and works. He becomes a subject of scholars' studies in his own right, instead of as a small part of broader Sikh narratives. As such, his works receive a more detailed treatment than in previous periods. The status of Gurdas's works as the most important Sikh sources outside of Sikh scripture is further underscored during this period.

**Works.** For example, in the early twentieth century, full commentaries on Gurdas's works begin to emerge. In 1911, Giani Bishan Singh first published a commentary on Gurdas's Brajbhāshā writings.<sup>51</sup> In 1912, Bhai Vir Singh published the commentary on the vārs that was completed by his grandfather, Giani Hazara Singh, in the late nineteenth century.<sup>52</sup> Pandit Narain Singh also published a

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<sup>49</sup> Jeevan Deol, "Text and Lineage in Early Sikh History: Issues in the Study of the Adi Granth," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 64, no. 1 (2001): footnote 95.

<sup>50</sup> I received a photograph of this from Gurinder Singh Mann.

<sup>51</sup> Bhai Bishan Singh, *Kabitt Savaiyye Bhai Gurdas Ji Satik* (Amritsar: Vazir Hind Press).

<sup>52</sup> Singh and Singh, *Varān Bhai Gurdās Satik*.



complete commentary on the vārs in 1913.<sup>53</sup> In the next decade, Sant Sampuran Singh published a distinct commentary on the kabitts,<sup>54</sup> and in 1929, Akali Kaur Singh furthered the ability for scholars to research the kabitts by publishing an index on them.<sup>55</sup> As the introductions to these commentaries indicate, Gurdas was a well-known historical figure in the early twentieth century.

It seems, however, that Gurdas's Punjabi works were by far the more popular part of his corpus, as the Brajbhāshā compositions were not known well-known in lay Sikh circles. Sampuran Singh writes that aside from their difficulty and their having been written in “Hindustani” language, it was assumed that contents of the Brajbhāshā works were identical to the easier-to-understand vārs. Moreover, had it not been for the kabitts being taught in a university course training Sikh scholars in Lahore, these works may have been lost altogether.<sup>56</sup> This corroborates Bishan Singh's statement that many people did not even know of the

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<sup>53</sup> Giani Narain Singh, *Ṭikā Giān Ratanāvalī Varān Bhai Gurdās* (Amritsar: 1914). Narain Singh says some Sikhs before him, whom he leaves anonymous, made commentaries on this important text in haste (for the purposes of religious preaching), but they left much to be desired. When he saw those commentaries, Narain Singh was pained. He reports being assisted in his endeavors by Bhai Rala Singh of Punjab Commercial Press, his teacher Giani Bibeka Singh, Sant Sarup Das, and Kahn Singh of Nabha (3).

<sup>54</sup> Sampuran Singh, *Sidhant Bodhanī Satīk Kabitt Savaiyyān Bhai Gurdās Ji* (Amritsar: Chattar Singh Jivan Singh, 2003). Sampuran Singh bemoans the contemporary understanding of Bhai Gurdas — that is he is well-quoted by his contemporaries in speeches, but his contributions are not utilized to their fullest potential. According to Sampuran Singh, the commentaries that exist have not adequately utilized this source, the *kūnjī* to the Sikh scripture (5).

<sup>55</sup> “Kabitt-Savaiyye,” Darshan Singh, Singh, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Sikhism*, 407.

<sup>56</sup> Singh, *Sidhant Bodini*, 8, 9.

Brajbhāshā works' existence, and no translation of the kabitts was available before his. This early twentieth century lack of popular familiarity with Gurdas's Brajbhāshā works stands in contrast to the preference shown to them in the above-discussed, pre-modern Sikh texts.

Also, the twentieth century commentators give Gurdas's works an important new title, *kūnjī*, or key to the Sikh scripture, further increasing Gurdas's importance in Sikh literary canon. Bishan Singh's 1911 commentary on the kabitts provides the first use of this title that I have found. In explaining the *kūnjī* title, Bishan Singh cites this pre-modern tradition: Bhai Gurdas humbly declines Guru Arjan's request to put Gurdas's writings in the scriptural text, and Guru Arjan blesses Gurdas's works, saying that they will forever bring Sikhs to the fold, for they will be the *kūnjī* to the scriptures.<sup>57</sup> Hazara Singh and Vir Singh's commentary on the vārs also articulate this designation, and it then shows up in the very title of Narain Singh's commentary on the vārs.<sup>58</sup> Narain Singh reports that there was, during that time, a prevalent aphorism about Gurdas's works which denoted its status as *kūnjī*.<sup>59</sup> Pre-modern Sikh writers from the *Sikhān Dī Bhagatmālā* author in the late eighteenth

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<sup>57</sup> That is, "*asikhān nūn sikhī prāpat hovegī*." Singh, *Kabitt Savaiyye Bhai Gurdas Ji Satīk*, 8, intro. section.

<sup>58</sup> Singh and Singh, *Varān Bhai Gurdās Satīk*. Narain Singh's commentary's long title begins: *Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji Di Kunji Arthat Giāni Ratanāvalī (41) Vārān*. Singh, *Ṭīkā Giān Ratanāvalī Varān Bhai Gurdās*.

<sup>59</sup> This is "*gur-bāñī dī kunjī bāñī, jo bhai gurdās vakhāñī*." See: Singh, *Ṭīkā Giān Ratanāvalī Varān Bhai Gurdās*, page urha.

century, to the Santokh Singh's *Gurpratāp Sūraj Granth* in the nineteenth, had declared that reading Gurdas's poetry would deepen one's understanding of Sikh life, and this *kūnjī* title is derived from that tradition. The title *kūnjī* has contributed to a general misconception that much of Gurdas's works belong to the historical period before Guru Arjan's death in 1606. In the next chapter I discuss how this prevalent, but late-coming title has led to an unfortunate mis-understanding about Gurdas's period of composition.

In addition to the Punjabi-language commentaries, a significant number of Gurdas's works were also translated into English during the early twentieth century.<sup>60</sup> Max Arthur Macauliffe, a British observer of the Sikhs in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, includes a chapter-long summary of Bhai Gurdas's expositions of Sikh philosophy in his six-volume work, *The Sikh Religion*.<sup>61</sup> Following John Malcolm and J.D. Cunningham, Gurdas is a major source for Macauliffe in reconstructing Sikh history of the seventeenth century.<sup>62</sup> Macauliffe includes translations of selections from Gurdas's vārs that cover a few dozen themes, frequently refers to Gurdas's opinions elsewhere in his work, and also includes several anecdotes about Gurdas with which Macauliffe's Sikh

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<sup>60</sup> Above we have mentioned John Malcolm's 1812 translations. Malcolm, *Sketch of the Sikhs*.

<sup>61</sup> Max Arthur Macauliffe, *The Sikh Religion (Its Gurus, Sacred Writings and Authors)*, Reprint ed., 6 vols., vol. 4 (Amritsar: Satvic Media Pvt. Ltd., 2000), 241-74.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 239-40.

informants must have been familiar.

Gurdas's works become highly important sources for Sikhs' quest in defining their tradition in light of modernity and a new, colonial-period religious awareness. In his defense of the distinct nature of the Sikh tradition, *Ham Hindu Nahīn* (Hindi for "We Are Not Hindus"), Kahn Singh Nabha has drawn from Bhai Gurdas's vārs and kabitts for support over forty times. This book was first published in 1898, and reprinted multiple times in the early twentieth century.<sup>63</sup> Bhai Jodh Singh's 1911 work, *Sikhī Kī Hai* ("What is Sikhism?") is a series of exegetical discourses based almost solely on selections from Gurdas's vārs.<sup>64</sup> Sampuran Singh says he wrote his commentary of Gurdas's kabitts during a period of polemical attacks on the Sikh religion.<sup>65</sup> He wishes that preachers like Bhai Gurdas would reveal themselves in his day and that his contemporary co-religionists could look at Gurdas's life to change their ways, and to be the kind of Sikhs who would put new converts onto the Sikh path.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> For an English translation see: Kahn Singh Nabha, *Sikhs, We Are Not Hindus*, ed. Preetpal Singh Bumra, trans. Jarnail Singh (Amritsar: Singh Brothers, 2006).

<sup>64</sup> Jodh Singh, *Sikhī Ki Hai?* (Delhi: Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Board, 1972).

<sup>65</sup> Sampuran Singh says the attackers labeled the community as lacking original, grand ideas (*chamatkārī paramarth*). Sampuran Singh says he has published his work to clearly contradict those who argue that the Sikh tradition's intellectual system (*pripati / paddhati*) is indistinct from the ancient (Hindu) intellectual system, and to stake out the Sikh tradition's independence from those systems. Singh, *Sidhant Bodini*, 7.

<sup>66</sup> For details about the narrative of Gurdas converting 700 people to Sikhism that Sampuran Singh is referencing here, please see the above discussion on Gurdas's depiction in *Mahimā Prakāsh*.

Sikh modernists' renewed interest in Gurdas's works resulted in a great discovery that increased the size of Gurdas's extant corpus. Bhai Vir Singh, who had published his grandfather's commentary on the vārs earlier in the century, found over 100 more, previously unknown, Brajbhāshā quatrains in disparate manuscripts. In 1940, he published these works in a separate edition, with commentary, and they have since enjoyed widespread acceptance as Gurdas's own works.<sup>67</sup> This publication included 119 poems that were not previously extant, a handful of which closely resemble some of the previously known works. Critical editions of Gurdas's work today have incorporated these poems, bringing the generally accepted total number of Brajbhāshā stanzas to 675.

**Biography.** The renewed interest in Gurdas's works also had an impact on his biographies. Works like Giani Gian Singh's *Tvārikh Guru Khalsa* and Macauliffe's *Sikh Religion*, continued the traditional depiction of Sikh history, and the figure of Gurdas played a great part in their retellings. These writers relied on the above-discussed traditional Sikh sources, particularly those from the mid-nineteenth century. For example, Macauliffe reports that he bases his stories of the life of Gurdas on Bhai Santokh Singh's writings and *Gurbilās Patshāhī Chevīn*.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Bhalla, *Kabitt Bhai Gurdas: Dusra Skand Saṭīk*.

<sup>68</sup> Macauliffe, *The Sikh Religion (Its Gurus, Sacred Writings and Authors)*, 1. Stories from Macauliffe's history about Gurdas include Gurdas requesting manuscripts from Baba Mohan, being appointed "spiritual duties" at the Darbar Sahib (Amritsar), and receiving gifts from the Mughal emperor. Macauliffe may have borrowed this detail from Giani Gian Singh's *Tvārikh Guru Khālsā*,

Gurdas's life also became an independent subject of twentieth-century historical investigation as scholars writing in Punjabi and English pieced together the details of his career trajectory. Many of these scholars did not list their sources, and it is therefore difficult to trace the origins of their data, but the biographies of Gurdas largely reflect previous tradition. These new biographies show that, by and large, the expansion of Gurdas's traditional life story was completed in the nineteenth century, with twentieth century scholars offering few new insights and building on old ones. They built on the 1800s sources like *Gurpratāp Sūraj Granth*, one of the latest sources to discuss Gurdas's life, as opposed to 1700s sources. This trend of relying on these late or undisclosed sources for Gurdas's life continues well into the late 1900s and is one of the reasons why Gurdas's biography deserves revision.

Bishan Singh and Sampuran Singh included brief biographies of Gurdas in their published commentaries on Gurdas's Brajbhāshā works. Bishan Singh's work makes a few references to Gurdas's life in his introduction to the kabitts'

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where Gian Singh describes Gurdas reading the contents of the Adi Granth to Emperor Akbar on a visit to the Sikh center [Giani Gian Singh, *Tvārīkh Guru Khālsā*, ed. K. S. Raju, Third ed. (Patiala: Bhasha Vibhag, 1999), 406-9.] Macauliffe's treatment of the story of Gurdas running away from Kabul to Benares after having felt he failed a test by Guru Hargobind and, being brought back to the Guru's court, shows how engrained this story—which, as discussed above, was rooted in eighteenth century texts but further elaborated in the nineteenth century—had become as part of Sikh lore and attached with Gurdas's life. Macauliffe gives the same date for Gurdas's death (5 Bhadon 1686) as *Gurbilās*. Macauliffe, *The Sikh Religion (Its Gurus, Sacred Writings and Authors)*, 133-7, 43-4.

commentary.<sup>69</sup> He recounts some of the well-known stories, but, in addition to including the above-discussed narrative about Gurdas's works being the key to Sikh scripture, argues in an extensive footnote that Gurdas was the author of a controversial part of Sikh scripture known as the *Rāgmālā*.<sup>70</sup> Sampuran Singh's biography of Gurdas is much more extensive and was published in Sikh tracts between 1930 and 1931, a few years after his commentaries on Gurdas's Brajbhāshā compositions.<sup>71</sup> Sampuran Singh is the first scholar to speculate about Gurdas's birth date. Having dated his death to 1629 CE, like the *Gurbilās* had a century earlier, Sampuran Singh estimates that Gurdas lived to be about a century old, and thus provides a 1528-9 CE birth date. Sampuran Singh incorporates the Sikh traditional stories about Gurdas being tested by Guru Hargobind into his speculations about Gurdas's career trajectory. He writes that the vārs are a product of Guru Arjan's time, and the kabitts are the product of Guru Hargobind's time, when Gurdas was the target of the Guru's anger for having run away, and needed to express his longing for being away from the Guru.<sup>72</sup> This trend of incorporating traditional sources, particularly of the nineteenth century, becomes a cornerstone of

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<sup>69</sup> Singh, *Kabitt Savaiyye Bhai Gurdas Ji Satīk*. Singh, *Sidhant Bodini*.

<sup>70</sup> For whatever reason, this account has not gained much ground in Sikh history.

<sup>71</sup> Darshan Singh says his account of Gurdas's life relies on *Gurbilās Patshahi Chevīn*, *Gurpratāp Sūraj Granth*, *Tvārīkh Guru Khālsā*, Macauliffe Singh, *Bhai Gurdas: Sikhī De Pahile Viākhīākār*, 4, 40.

<sup>72</sup> Singh, *Sidhant Bodini*, 8.

Gurdas's biographies in contemporary times.

Ganda Singh published the first English biography of Gurdas in 1930 in an English weekly out of Lahore, *The Khalsa*, in 1930.<sup>73</sup> Ganda Singh's biography provided the second postulation about Gurdas's birth date: October 1551 CE. Ganda Singh further provides information about Gurdas's parents, which contradicts data in the *bhaṭṭ vahīs* and Kesar Singh Chhibbar's *Bansāvalīnāmā*. Ganda Singh reports, for the first time, that Gurdas's mother's name was Sukh Devi, and that his father was Datar Chand, which is the name of the brother of Gurdas's father from the other sources, Ishardas Bhalla.<sup>74</sup>

Bhai Vir Singh's biography of Gurdas has carried much weight in Sikh academic circles. Like Bishan Singh and Sampuran Singh, whose biographies of Gurdas were tied to their commentaries of his Brajbhāshā works, Vir Singh's biography was published, in 1940, along with the commentary and text of the 119 kabitts he brought to light. Unlike Ganda Singh, who provided Gurdas a birth date without disclosing the sources on which that date was based, Vir Singh engages in a deeper speculation about Gurdas's birth, finally guessing that he was probably born between 1543 and 1553 CE. Before taking up Gurdas's life and works, Vir Singh had edited and published a multi-volume set of Santokh Singh's *Gurpratāp Sūraj*

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<sup>73</sup> I have not found access to the original document of Ganda Singh's biography and rely on large segments re-published in Darshan Singh's book. Singh, *Bhai Gurdas: Sikhī De Pahile Viākhīākār*.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 49 fn 23.



*Granth*, and his data for Gurdas's life seem to rely heavily on that source. Because even in that nineteenth century source, not enough data about Gurdas's life is given to such an extensive biography, Vir Singh also relies on conjecture based on other stories about the growth of the Sikh community, and the birth and death of other important Sikh figures. Like Kahn Singh Nabha, who had written a brief article on Gurdas in his encyclopedia, *Mahāṅkosh*, Vir Singh provides a year for Gurdas's death that corresponds with 1637 CE.<sup>75</sup>

### **A Summation of Gurdas in Sikh Sources, 1700-1950**

**His works.** Beginning with the Brajbhāshā kabitts, use of Gurdas's works for doctrinal and textual support began in the 1700s, and these works remained highly important in learned Sikh circles until the mid-nineteenth century. Late eighteenth century histories of the lives of the Sikh Gurus drew on Gurdas's writings as sources, and explicitly mention the high importance of Gurdas's works in Sikh life. Before the end of the eighteenth century, another set of landmark texts begin to emerge, which take Gurdas's Vār 1 and 11 as the subjects of extensive prose commentaries.<sup>76</sup> One of these two texts, *Bhagatmālā*, a commentary on Gurdas's

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<sup>75</sup> Kahn Singh Nabha, ed., *Gurshabad Ratanākar Mahāṅkosh*, Sixth ed. (Patiala: Bhasha Vibhag, 1999), 416. Bhalla, *Kabitt Bhai Gurdas: Dusra Skand Saṭik*, 81. Vir Singh relies on the dating of Baba Budha's death which is said to have happened before Gurdas's.

<sup>76</sup> Sant Sampuran Singh has compared the attributed author of these texts—Bhai Mani Singh—to important Vedanta philosopher Shankar, for doing the commentary on the commentary of Sikh

Eleventh Vār, adds to the understanding of the importance of Gurdas's works by advancing the notion that Guru Arjan himself declared Gurdas's works to be the authoritative commentary on Sikh scripture. This story, and the understanding of Gurdas's works it carries, provides the foundation of the twentieth century designation of Gurdas's works as the *kūñjī*, or key, to Sikh scripture.

1800s Sikh texts further emphasize the importance of Gurdas's works in Sikh life. *Gurpratāp Sūraj Granth* adds six Sanskrit shaloks to Gurdas's corpus. These were translated and commented on by Bhai Vir Singh, but have not gained recognition as Gurdas's own authentic compositions. This may be because of the difficulty and remoteness of the language in which they are written, the lack of manuscript evidence accompanying them, or their late admission to Gurdas's corpus—over two centuries after his death.

Whereas Bhai Santokh Singh's efforts at injecting the Gurdas-attributed Sanskrit shaloks into Gurdas's corpus has not carried much weight in Sikh circles, Bhai Vir Singh's addition of 119 Brajbhāshā quatrains has resulted in the more widespread acceptance of these previously unknown works. Also in the twentieth century Gurdas's entire Punjabi and Brajbhāshā corpus became the subject of commentaries and translation into Punjabi prose as his eleventh and first vārs had become in the late eighteenth century. Extensive selections from the vārs also began

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scripture.

to be translated into English.

Furthermore, Sikhs engaged in the modernization of their religion used Gurdas's vārs to support their calling for the religion's exclusivity and its unique identity—a project in which Gurdas himself seems to have been engaged during his times. In the early 1900s, Gurdas's works were part of university training of Sikh theologians and preachers.<sup>77</sup> Whereas the earliest 1700s sources for dealing with Gurdas's works had treated the kabitts primarily, in the 1900s Sikhs were more used to dealing with Punjabi. This meant a heightened importance given to Gurdas's vārs, more than the kabitts—a trend that continues to this day. Beginning in the middle of the twentieth century, the vārs—and to a far lesser extent, the kabitts as well—became the subject of critical study. Viewed not just as religious texts, but as landmarks in literature, the vārs began to enjoy a special place in scholars' configuration of Punjabi literary history.

**His biography.** References to Gurdas's importance as a scribe began to appear 1600s and early 1700s Sikh sources. This initial depiction of Gurdas as the scribe for a landmark Sikh scriptural manuscript was followed by his depiction in later 1700s literature as a poet and leading figure of the Sikh community. Texts like the late 1700s *Bhagatmālā* add amanuensis of Sikh scriptural texts to Gurdas's litany of roles. Also in the late 1700s, Gurdas began to be depicted as a holy man,

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<sup>77</sup> Singh, *Sidhant Bodini*, 8, 9.

with supernatural religious powers. In *Mahimā Prakāsh*, his prayers help traveling Sikhs to ford a river on the way to a religious visit to the Sikh center. In *Bhagatmālā*, long-deceased poet saints appear to Gurdas, requesting him to include their compositions in the scriptural text he is compiling.

Gurdas's mystical attributes are further developed in the 1800s texts as he appears, after his own death, to a Sikh on his deathbed in the text of *Gurbilās*. In the 1800s sources like *Gurpratāp Sūraj Granth*, Gurdas is depicted as an officiant at religious ceremonies, and a political leader who bears a considerable burden on behalf of the growing community. In this period, Gurdas's scribal role is compared in its importance to that of Lord Ganesh's inscription of the Mahabharata text under the auspices of Lord Brahma (whose counterpart in this equation would be Guru Arjan).

In the early 1900s, Gurdas becomes the subject of independent biographical pieces, and possible dates for his birth are discussed for the first time. Few substantive additions are made to Gurdas's traditional biography after the middle of twentieth century. Aside from excessively creative attempts to reconstruct Gurdas's life, much of the twentieth century scholarship on Gurdas's life has absorbed the pre-modern texts' claims without much question as to their veracity or meaning.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Giani Lal Singh Sangrur makes Gurdas a contemporary of Guru Nanak, and extends his age to

## Aspects of Gurdas's Biography to Reconsider

As widely as Gurdas has been cited in Sikh scholarship, a historical source and personality of his stature deserves an even closer look. Certain received aspects of Gurdas's traditional biography have become absorbed in the critical scholarship on his life and career, and deserve re-examination. The first of these is the assumption that Gurdas composed his writings before the Kartarpur Pothis compilation in 1604. This assumption will be questioned in the next chapter as part of my discussion of Gurdas's works.

Second, the *guru-svāṅ* story, which involves Gurdas being tested by the Guru and running away, does not stand up to textual scrutiny, though biographers until the late twentieth century cite it as a cornerstone of Gurdas's biography. The various versions of this story do not match up. In the *Mahimā Prakāsh* versions, it is Guru Arjan who initially tested Gurdas, who, having failed the test, ran away to some anonymous land. Gurdas remained estranged during the martyrdom of Guru Arjan and did not return to face penitence until summoned by Guru Hargobind. This story takes a different trajectory in the *Gurbilās* version. In this text, the story is modified to meet its author's understanding that Gurdas did not write his

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133 years at death. Lal Singh was inconsistent in his dating, sometimes he gave Gurdas the age of 100 years at his death, at other times he says Gurdas lived to be 136 years old. Giani Lal Singh Sangrur, *Gurdas Darshan* (Malwa Dharmak Sabha, 1955), Giani Lal Singh Sangrur, *Guru Bansāvalī Te Pantakh Prasiddha Hastiān* (Singh Pur: Malwa Dharmak Sabha, 1939).

poetry until after the inscription of the Sikh scriptural manuscript, and was present at the Sikh center during the period of Guru Arjan's martyrdom. Thereby, in that retelling, which became the accepted version, Gurdas is tested under Guru Hargobind alone. Rattan Singh Bhangu's *Panth Prakāsh* skips this story altogether and provides an entirely different interpretation of the *guru-svāṅg* verse. The few scholars who have recently challenged this legend deserve to be heard. This story has already been critically examined by scholars like Darshan Singh, and Brahmjagdish Singh has correctly rejected this story altogether as an attempt by later writers to explain a series of confusing excerpts from Gurdas's writings.<sup>79</sup>

Third, and related to the above, the sentiment behind the *guru-svāṅg* legend assumes that Gurdas did indeed question Sikh leadership in his works. Hew Mcleod is one of the scholars influenced by this view:

It is possible to read [Vār stanza 26.24] as an expression of genuine questioning on the part of Bhai Gurdas. Indeed, this conclusion is unavoidable. Bhai Gurdas was genuinely perplexed by the behaviour of the sixth Guru, as he surveyed such puzzling features as hunting, gaol-going and even untrustworthy servants in his retinue. The other Gurus were not like this. Why should this one be so different? And then in his two concluding lines he provides the only answer that seems to him to make sense. The Guru is still the Guru and loyal Sikhs will recognize him as such. This suggests that change had certainly taken place under Guru Hargobind, but that the direction of the change was not yet clear.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Singh, *Bhai Gurdas: Rachana Sansar*, 17.

<sup>80</sup> W. H. McLeod, *Sikhism* (London: New York, 1997), 35-6. In another work, McLeod repeats the sentiment: "Bhai Gurdas was clearly disturbed by the changes that overtook the Panth with the accession of Guru Hargobind..." McLeod, *Sikhs of the Khalsa: A History of the Khalsa Rahit*, 33.

This assessment neither matches Gurdas's broad agenda in general, or with the *vār* in question in particular. Reading the whole of the *Vār* from which McLeod takes his excerpt, as well as *Vār* 35 (on which traditional writers build the *guru-svāṅg* episode), shows quite clearly that Gurdas confronts the Guru's detractors during a period of schism and upheaval. Furthermore, the *guru-svāṅg* issue appears not just in the thirty-fifth *Vār*, but in other parts of Gurdas's corpus, like *Kabitt* 402. We can clearly glean from Gurdas's writings that he was a devoted Sikh. He was a staunch supporter of the lineage of Sikh Gurus from Nanak to Hargobind. When the office of the Guru passed from Gurdas's uncle, Guru Amardas, to a member of the Sodhi clan, Gurdas's devotion lay with the shift of the office, and not with rival claimants from his own clan, the Bhallas.<sup>81</sup> Later writers have underestimated Gurdas's undying loyalty to the Guru, and have misunderstood Gurdas's career goals and self-conception.

How much did he travel, and what kind of education did he receive? In the 1800s, *Gurbilās* gave first death date outside of *bhaṭṭ vahīs* (1629), and Sampuran Singh, in the 1900s, was the first to speculate on his birth date (1530s)—are these dates accurate? What was his self-conception as a writer and how did he perceive

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<sup>81</sup> Please see v26.33 where Gurdas calls out all rival claimants to the Guru-ship, including his own ancestors Mohan (whom he calls "crazed") and Mohri Bhalla. He also articulates the notion that the Sodhi family (from Guru Ramdas to Gurus Arjan and Hargobind) has accepted the burden of leadership and will hold the office of the Sikh Guru indefinitely (please see v1.47, 1.48, 26.24).

his own role in Sikh history? On what basis have writers given his works the title of “*kūñjī*,” and did Gurdas see himself as a scriptural commentator? These questions will be taken up in the remainder of this dissertation.



## Chapter Two

### An Introduction to Gurdas's Works

Gurdas is depicted as an interpreter of Sikh scripture, and his works are depicted as commentary. However, Gurdas does not see himself with that lens: he calls himself a *ḍhāḍī* (“minstrel,” v36.21) and insofar as he writes kabitts, a *bhatt* (“panegyrist,” v15.2). He very consciously builds on the body of Sikh literature before him, and yet makes his own place as one of the Sikh tradition’s most pioneering poets.

#### What Gurdas Inherited: Context of Writing in the Early Sikh Tradition

Well before Gurdas, the early Sikh tradition established writing as an important part of Sikh life, portraying religious writing as a devotional act. Guru Nanak’s (d. 1539) compositions, which form the core of Sikh scripture, repeatedly refer to the Guru as a minstrel of the divine court.<sup>1</sup> They speak of writing the name of God onto one’s mind with the pen of love, and praising the divine through writing is a worthy and infinite act. God is the ultimate writer, inscribing each man’s destiny on his forehead, and the divine pen takes account of every person’s

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<sup>1</sup> The word used is *ḍhāḍī*. See the Guru Granth Sahib (hereafter, GG), pages 148, 149, 150, 468, 1286.

actions.<sup>2</sup> From Gurdas's writings we learn that Guru Nanak traveled with a book in hand, and scholars think this book must have contained the Guru's own compositions (v1.32 and v1.33).

Before Gurdas's lifetime, each of the Gurus wrote, and participated in the commentary of his predecessor's writings. Guru Nanak's successors are engaged in an inter-generational conversation in their writings, which represents the first stage of Sikh commentary.<sup>3</sup> Guru Nanak's successor Guru Angad (d. 1552) left revelations that were very close to the founder's, and the tradition of Sikh exegesis began within the Sikh scripture itself "as Guru Nanak's successors reinforced, elaborated, and responded to his ideas while composing their own hymns."<sup>4</sup> Guru Amardas (d. 1574), the third Guru, compiled the Sikh scriptural manuscripts known as the Goindval Pothis.<sup>5</sup> For him, writing was a metaphor for internal spirituality: one need not write with a pen, but on the paper of one's heart. The Gurmukhs (pious Sikhs) write the truth and reflect on it.<sup>6</sup> The fourth Guru, Ramdas (d. 1581), wrote extensively and says that those hands that write the praise

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<sup>2</sup> GG 3, 5, 16, 930, 1241, 1280.

<sup>3</sup> For more on this tradition, please see Singh, *Gurbani Dian Viakhia Paranalian*.

<sup>4</sup> Mann, *The Making of Sikh Scripture*, 18.

<sup>5</sup> For a scholarly treatment of these, see Gurinder Singh Mann, *The Goindval Pothis: The Earliest Extant Source of the Sikh Canon* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> GG 84, 123.

of the lord are blessed.<sup>7</sup> His son and successor, Guru Arjan (d.1606), under whose aegis Gurdas inscribed the Kartarpur Pothis, proclaims that those who write down the Guru's words wash away their own sins, and guarantee liberation for their families. Listening to the kirtan (musical performance of the Guru's word) involves inscribing the praises of the Lord in one's mind.<sup>8</sup>

Compositions attributed to Mardana (Guru Nanak's companion), Satta and Balvand (authors of *Rāmkalī Ki Vār*), Sundar (author of the *Sadd*), and those of bards at the Sikh court (authors of *savaiyye*) are included in the Sikh scripture. The tradition of the Sikh community employing writers in the Sikh court, discussing basic Sikh ideas and practices, begins probably under the pontificate of Guru Amardas, Gurdas's uncle. These writers are Gurdas's forbearers, and their works are included in the Guru Granth. Their writings allude to the power of the Sikh Guru, and the strength of the Sikh community.

Satta and Balvand's Vār appears to have been most clearly in Gurdas's mind during his own period of writing. Satta and Balvand portray Guru Nanak not only as a holy man, but as a world-conquering king who passes on his royalty to his successors.<sup>9</sup> Gurdas echoes this in a near verbatim fashion in Vār 1 (v1.46). Satta,

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<sup>7</sup> GG 540.

<sup>8</sup> GG 81, 185, 650.

<sup>9</sup> GG 966.

Balvand, Bhatt Kall, and Gurdas all use the metaphor of the “reversal of the Ganges” to refer to the succession of the Guru-ship (v1.38).<sup>10</sup>

Sundar provides another example of an early royal depiction of the Sikh Guru, something that the bhatt̥s and Gurdas expanded after him.<sup>11</sup> Sundar portrays the transference of Guruship from Guru Amardas to Ramdas as a royal coronation, saying that the entire world prostrates to Guru Ramdas’s feet.<sup>12</sup> Depicting the Guru as a religious and political sovereign seems to have been a prevalent practice in the sixteenth century as Sikh scriptural scholars report an inscription on a landmark manuscript that describes Guru Nanak as an emperor and spiritual leader.<sup>13</sup> Later, Bhatt̥ Kalsahar depicted Ramdas as a spiritual warrior, wearing a coat of mail and having conquered the world.<sup>14</sup> Gurdas repeatedly echoes this royal depiction of the Gurus. For example, he depicts Guru Hargobind as a sovereign with a royal canopy overhead, and, echoing Sundar, the word is his royal standard (v3.3, v39.4).

That only one of the bhatt̥s, Kall, writes of Guru Nanak provides Gurdas with a great opportunity to expand the founder’s hagiography. Kall portrays Nanak in

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<sup>10</sup> GG 967, 1393.

<sup>11</sup> GG 923. For Sundar, the Guru’s word is the true standard (royal flag) and sign of divinity.

<sup>12</sup> GG 924.

<sup>13</sup> Singh, *Life and Work of Guru Arjan*, 124. Mann, *The Goindval Pothis: The Earliest Extant Source of the Sikh Canon*, 97.

<sup>14</sup> GG 1397.

light of historical religious figures and deities but not necessarily as a leader or king. In Kall's portrayal, Nanak supercedes all the Vaishnava deities and all the Vaishnava poet-saints sing his praises. The bhaṭṭs call Angad the world preceptor (*jagat guru*), and Gurdas mirrors this epithet for Nanak (v24.2, v24.4). Bhaṭṭ Tall calls Guru Angad a lion (*sinh*), and Gurdas makes the same comparison with Guru Hargobind (v5.12). The bhaṭṭs are the first in Sikh literature to talk of the lineage of the Sodhis, Guru Ramdas's clan, and Gurdas echoes expands this to compare the clan to a dynasty.<sup>15</sup> Bhaṭṭ Kalsahar adds that Arjan is a fearless leader who can absorb the fear of his devotee, and Gurdas talks of Hargobind in the same way (v26.24). Guru Arjan has passed Guru Ramdas's test and, in Gurdas's compositions, the Sikhs are undergoing Guru Hargobind's test (v35.19).<sup>16</sup> Gurdas's use of the epithet "Vahiguru" for the divine in his own works (Vār 1, especially) comes from the bhaṭṭs—no Guru had used it in his writings.

Independent accounts of the lives of the Guru, *janam-sākhīs*, were also gaining currency during this time, but these accounts lie outside the Sikh scriptural canon.<sup>17</sup> A leading scholar of these texts, Kirpal Singh, argues that these accounts

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<sup>15</sup> See v1.48 and *tini sri ramdasu sodhi thiru thapyao* (GG 1401), *kuli sodhi* (GG 1407).

<sup>16</sup> Bhaṭṭ Kall: *gur parchai parvaṇu*, GG 1408.

<sup>17</sup> These sources are not considered here. Though a critical edition has not yet been established for these sources, Bhai Vir Singh has done a yeoman's job in publishing his findings on this topic. See his *Puratan Janam Sakhi. Puratan Janam Sakhi Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji*, ed. Bhai Vir Singh (New Delhi: Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan, 2004).

must have evolved from oral form in the late 1500s.<sup>18</sup> Future endeavors in the textual history of these accounts will provide materials for comparison with Gurdas's works, particularly Vār 1 containing his account of Guru Nanak's life and mission.

It is clear that Gurdas is the inheritor of a century-long Sikh literary tradition, on which he consciously expands, voluminously. Gurdas knew the writings of his Sikh predecessors well, read them carefully, and was trying to build on their work. He picks up where the bhaṭṭs left off: hagiographical writings of the Gurus and verses praising the Sikh community lend prestige to the tradition. Specific language and use of writing are shared over the years, and Gurdas's writings are an extension of the use of the written word to help Sikhs lay out the issues of the day.

### **When Gurdas Wrote**

The importance of Gurdas's works is clearly established in Sikh tradition; they are unparalleled in their explanations of the Sikh way of life. However, the designation of Gurdas's works as *kūñjī*, or key to Sikh scripture, has interfered with the proper dating of the works. Below, I revisit the history of this designation and clarify its chronology.

**The prevalent view.** Most scholars negotiate the works' dating by noting

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<sup>18</sup> Singh, *The Janamsakhi Tradition: An Analytical Study*.

accepted Sikh tradition, adding datable stanzas of the vārs, and conceding the difficulty of the process.<sup>19</sup> A typical dating of the vārs follows:

There is no internal or external evidence available to determine the exact time of the composition of these vārs, but it can be assumed that vārs (Nos. 3, 11, 13, 24, 26, 38, 39) which have references to Guru Hargobind who came into spiritual inheritance in 1606 after the death of Guru Arjan, his predecessor, might have been composed sometime after that year, and the others implicitly prior to that date. The Vār 36 on the *mīnās* probably was written before the compilation of the Sikh Scripture in 1603-4.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, the kabitts are dated in various ways, but most scholars say they were written after the vārs:

As regards [sic] the time and place of these compositions, opinion varies. It is generally believed that a major part of this work was completed after the poet's more popular work, the Vārs, had been written. The more likely venue was Kashi and Agra where the Bhai had lived for some time. The conjecture is strengthened by several factors. One, the theme of the poetry belongs to the poet's maturer [sic] years. Second, the language of these compositions is akin to the contemporary religious and literary genius of Kashi and Agra. A pang of separation from the Guru is the running theme of this poetry.<sup>21</sup>

Whereas, the majority of scholars date the vārs to the earlier portion of Gurdas's career, a substantial minority of scholars has argued that Gurdas must have written the kabitts before the vārs. The most prominent voice in this debate is that of Sita

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<sup>19</sup> For example, See Singh, *Bhai Gurdas: Sikhī De Pahile Viākhīākār*, 39.

<sup>20</sup> "Kabitt-Savaiyye," Darshan Singh, Singh, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Sikhism*, 407.

Emphases added.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. Emphasis added.

Ram Bahri, who argues that Gurdas wrote the kabitts in his youth, influencing his later composition of the vārs.<sup>22</sup>

The majority of scholars agree that Gurdas wrote all of his works sometime between the late 1500s and 1630 or so. Scholars point to this wide range perhaps one of 60 years, despite an abundance of data from all of Gurdas's works relating to the period of the sixth Guru's reign (discussed below), which begins in 1606. Scholars who hold firm to this wide range, believe that Gurdas wrote many, if not most, of his works before 1606, and then peppered in a few of the dateable stanzas after that date.<sup>23</sup>

**Opposing Views.** If at least some of Gurdas's works were written during the late 1500s, why are they not available in the scriptural text prepared in 1604? This text included the writings of the Sikh Gurus as well as others: writings of Sikh bards and poets were included in the scriptural text up until the early seventeenth century.<sup>24</sup> It seems likely that if Gurdas's compositions were available during the

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<sup>22</sup> Sita Ram Bahri, "Bhai Gurdas Di Boli Te Shaili," in *Bhai Gurdas: Jivan Te Rachna*, ed. Kapur Singh Ghuman (Patiala: Bhasha Vibhag, 1983).

<sup>23</sup> The above mentioned encyclopedia entry bases its pre-1603 dating of Vār 36 on evidence from Kesar Singh Chhibbar's *Bansāvalīnāmā*.

<sup>24</sup> Manuscript evidence shows that the writings of Sikhs, which finally made their way into the Guru Granth, were still developing in the late sixteenth century and first four years of the seventeenth century. There is evidence between the two scriptural manuscripts, the MS 1245 and the Kartarpur Pothei, to show that the bhatt's writings were still developing between 1595 (the birth of Guru Hargobind mentioned in MS 1245) and 1604 (the compilation of the Kartarpur Pothei). Piar Singh says that the MS 1245 does not contain Satta and Balvand's var, and only 32 of the 122 *savaiyyās* of the bhatt's are there (all written by Kalya). Incidentally, neither does the MS 1245 include the text of the *ragmālā*. All of these compositions make their first appearance in the dated, 1604 Kartarpur



compilation processes of the early scriptural texts, they would have been included.

Furthermore, it is highly unlikely that the schismatic agents, whose spurious writings some sources say forced Guru Arjan to compile the Kartarpur Pothis, were writing as early as 1604. In his re-visioning of the history of Sikh scripture, Gurinder Singh Mann says that Miharban probably did not begin writing his compositions, which were authoritative for his followers, until well after the compilation of the Kartarpur Pothis.<sup>25</sup> This interpretation of the historical data calls into question the notion that Gurdas would have dedicated entire vārs to denigrating the schismatic groups before Guru Arjan's death. J. S. Grewal and Jeevan Deol agree that Prithi Chand tried to succeed his younger brother, Arjan, as sixth Guru.<sup>26</sup> It would make much more sense that the issue of schism was more salient after 1606, and it was the legitimacy of Guru Hargobind that the schismatics actively rejected.

Unlike other treatments of Gurdas's works, *Gurbilās* and the Mani Singh *Janam-Sākhī* portray them as having been written after the compilation of the Kartarpur Pothis.<sup>27</sup> This lack of the sources' consensus on when Gurdas wrote is

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Pothi. Piar Singh reports that the MS 1245 does include Sundar's *Sadd*, as well as the above-mentioned 32 poems from the bhaṭṭs. Piar Singh, *Gatha Sri Adi Granth and the Controversy* (Michigan: Anant Education and Rural Development Foundation, 1996).

<sup>25</sup> Mann, *The Making of Sikh Scripture*, 36.

<sup>26</sup> Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*, 62, 64-6. Deol, "The Minas and Their Literature."

<sup>27</sup> *Gurbilās Pātshāhī Chevīn*, 145. *Puratan Janam Sakhi Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji*, 9.

important to register. Unfortunately, without much questioning, selective treatment of these stories led to the unquestioned acceptance, in twentieth century scholarship, of the position that Gurdas's works were written during Guru Arjan's lifetime.

Kirpal Singh dates Gurdas's First Vār "beyond doubt" between 1630 and 1637.<sup>28</sup> In his biography of the fifth Sikh Guru, Pashaura Singh says that Gurdas's account of the death of Guru Arjan was a contemporary one.<sup>29</sup> Brahmjagdish Singh points to a handful of distinct scholarly arguments about the dating of Gurdas's vārs: one states that the First Vār shows evidence of being written after Akbar's reign (d. 1605); another indicates that there is no mention of Guru Hargobind's battle with Mughals, which is dated to 1628.<sup>30</sup>

J. S. Grewal's work firmly dates all of the vārs to the early seventeenth century, which he says was "a phase of Sikh history that was marked by crisis and transition".<sup>31</sup> However he makes no mention of the dating of the kabitts. Another Sikh historian, Sukhdial Singh, argues that Gurdas wrote his vārs during the years

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<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, Kirpal Singh cites Mani Singh's Janam-Sakhi, which says that Gurdas was asked to write the first var after 1604. Kirpal Singh notes that the Miharban Janam Sakhi, the Puratan Janam Sakhi, and the first vār of Bhai Gurdas "resemble with one another very much" and that "Many sakhis are quite similar in these two Janamsakhis and at places their language is also the same." Singh, *The Janamsakhi Tradition: An Analytical Study*, 32-8.

<sup>29</sup> Singh, *Life and Work of Guru Arjan*, 39-40.

<sup>30</sup> Singh, *Bhai Gurdas: Rachana Sansar*, 21.

<sup>31</sup> Grewal, "The Sikh Panth in the Vars of Bhai Gurdas," 26.

1610-1628, and is also certain that they were written after the compilation of the Adi Granth, during a period of schismatic rivalry. He clarifies that it is not possible that Guru Arjan compiled the Granth in order to protect the scripture from spurious additions from his brother's faction because Miharban was the first writer in that genre, and his life dates preclude his having written before Guru Arjan's death.<sup>32</sup>

Building on these last two arguments, I recognize the kabitts in my analysis, and argue that they were largely written after the vārs.<sup>33</sup> The composition period of some of the kabitts may have overlapped with the end of Gurdas's vār-writing.<sup>34</sup> In the future, deep inspection of a broad range of data will help to give greater certainty to the composition order and chronology.

**Data from Gurdas's works.** The most important pieces of internal data to underscore this are the early seventeenth century events in Gurdas's vār: the compilation of Sikh scripture (1604), the death of Guru Arjan (1606), the ascendance of Guru Hargobind (r. 1606-1644), his imprisonment in Gwalior jail (c.

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<sup>32</sup> Sukhdial Singh, *Guru Kaal: 1469-1708*, vol. 5, *Punjab Da Itihas* (Patiala: Punjabi University, 2000), 40.

<sup>33</sup> Moreover, evidence from an albeit limited number of manuscripts indicates that Gurdas may have written the vārs out of the order in which we receive them today. Please see Gursharan Kaur Jaggi's treatment of manuscripts: Gurdas Bhalla, *Varān Bhai Gurdās (Sampadan Ate Path-Nirdharan)*, ed. Gursharan Kaur Jaggi, Second ed. (Patiala: Punjabi University Publications Bureau, 1999), 54-58.

<sup>34</sup> That vārs were written out of their final order, when seen in light of the 20th-century discovery of the final 119 kabitts by Bhai Vir Singh, indicates that Gurdas may have stopped and recommenced his writings several times in his career.

1610), and his fashioning himself as a bellicose prince. Moreover, Vār 4 prescribes an ethical Sikh response to suffering. Gurdas says in this vār that Sikhs should arrive at the Sikh center, cry together and heal together (v4.18). This would have been timely in light of Guru Arjan's 1606 death at the hands of the Mughal state in assuaging the fears of anxious Sikhs. Gurdas echoes these statements of suffering often elsewhere in the vārs. In light of the threat of schism posed by the group led by Guru Arjan's brother, Gurdas has much to say about the detractors from what he perceives as the rightful Sikh community.<sup>35</sup>

Furthermore, the themes of many of the kabitts follow the vārs. Although they have been portrayed as related only to belief, kabitts are not without historical significance. Kabitts 221, 368, and 402 mirrors the language of the "svāṅg" verses from the 35th Vār, which extol Sikhs to stay close to the Guru amidst the sectarian confusions. Kabitt 387 parallels the language of the polemical Vārs 31-37. In Kabitt 570, Gurdas claims that other gurus' are writing *bāṇī* (the word of the Sikh Gurus, the scriptural form of revelation) and Gurdas says a true Sikh knows the difference between Guru's *bāṇī* and those of others. This would have been most salient in the first three decades of the seventeenth century when a rival claimant to Guru Arjan's office was writing.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> For example Vārs 30-37 line up as a group of anti-schism polemics.

<sup>36</sup> If Gurdas is referring to Miharban, the son of the rival group's leader and author of many interpretive and commentarial compositions called *goshṭis*, then Kabitt 254 is also illuminating

The poet's play with his own name in the Brajbhāshā poetry implies that he was well known to his audience.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, the poet's reflective mood in some kabitts befits their composition by a senior poet.<sup>38</sup> As such, the indication that he was well renowned at the time of writing of the Brajbhāshā works to employ self-referential strategies indicates that the Brajbhāshā works are from a slightly later time in Gurdas's career than the vārs.

Thus, in light of historical evidence, we must abandon the argument that Gurdas's works were written during Guru Arjan's lifetime as untenable. The internal evidence shows they were from between 1606 and 1630. This was a time of political upheaval, and sectarian schism. It was an unprecedented period in Sikh history when the Sikh Guru himself did not write.

### **What Gurdas Wrote**

Gurdas wrote in two distinct literary genres, each with very different styles and in distinct languages: the Punjabi vār and the Brajbhāshā kabitt. Bhai Santokh Singh, writing in the mid-nineteenth century, also attributes six Sanskrit shaloks to

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where he says that *goshṭis* are nothing special, many people may write them, and they do not compare with the unmediated experience of the Guru's word. It is possible that Gurdas refers here to the compositions of the Nath Yogis, which are also referred to as *bāṇī*.

<sup>37</sup> For examples, see Kabitts 106-8, 551.

<sup>38</sup> For example, see the poet's despondence at his reflection on his life trajectory in Kabitt 578, which is translated as the epigraph to Chapter One. See also Kabitt 571.

Gurdas.<sup>39</sup> However, these verses are too few, too short, and their authorship too uncertain to have figured into this dissertation's considerations. There is strong tradition that Gurdas wrote yet other, non-extant pieces of poetry. Piara Singh Padam, Rattan Singh Jaggi, and Amritpal Kaur allude to the possibility that there exist hitherto undiscovered poems of Bhai Gurdas.<sup>40</sup>

Gurdas's works are typically considered to be scriptural "commentary," and even the earliest sources, like *Bhagatmālā*, refer to them as *ṭīkā*, a secondary interpretation of a primary text. The works are interpretive poems that organize teachings found in the Guru Granth, prevalent practices and ethics. They quote from scripture and answer challenges of that day. Gurdas frequently utilizes inter-textual allusions, which should not be confused with scriptural commentary. For example, in Vār 6 Gurdas takes a number of near-quotations from Guru Nanak's foundational hymn, *Jap*. In the first stanza, he uses Guru Nanak's words for the divine realm, *sach khand*, to refer to the Sikh congregation. In the third stanza, he refers to the first few compositions in Sikh scripture when describing the normative liturgical schedule. In the fifth stanza, he echoes the text of Guru Nanak's final stanza in *Jap* to embody the point that the holy word is to be at the center of Sikh worship. In these, rather than "commenting" in prose, Gurdas weaves in some of

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<sup>39</sup> Singh, *Sri Gurpratap Suraj Granth*, 3057-61.

<sup>40</sup> Padam, "Bhai Gurdas Di Hindi Rachna," 220. Jaggi, *Bhai Gurdas: Jīvan Te Rachna*, 149. Kaur, *Shabad Anukraminika Te Kosh - Kabīr Savaiyye Bhai Gurdas*, viii.

the well-known verses from the scripture and while leaning on its authority.<sup>41</sup>

## The Vārs

**Organization.** Each of Gurdas's forty vārs, comprising 913 total stanzas, is organized according to rhythm of stanzas and around a set of themes. On average, each vār has about 23 stanzas; most have either 20 or 21. There is no vār with less than twenty stanzas, and Vār 1 has, by far, the most with 49. The number of lines in each stanza varies considerably (between five and ten), but all lines in each stanza rhyme with each other.<sup>42</sup> The last line of the stanza is usually shorter than all others, and no one rhythm scheme that runs throughout the vārs, amplifying the genre's rustic flavor.

Due to various confusions, scholars have sometimes counted the number of vārs at 39, but evidence from early manuscripts clearly establishes the number at 40.<sup>43</sup> Nripinder Singh explains that the reason some scholars count only 39 vārs is

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<sup>41</sup> This weaving in of scriptural verses is not unique to the vārs, though the practice in the kabitts is completely overlooked by scholars. Please see the first line of Kabitt 54, and compare it to *āpīñai āp sājio āpīñai rachio nāo* (GG 463).

<sup>42</sup> Some stanzas even have double rhymes where they rhyme at the halfway point of the verse.

<sup>43</sup> In particular, a manuscript in Khalsa College's (Amritsar) possession with an earlier ordering of vārs and Manuscript number 562 in Patiala's Central Public Library clearly attributes 40 vārs to Gurdas's authorship. For a detailed treatment of the manuscript evidence of Gurdas's vārs, please see Bhalla, *Varān Bhai Gurdās (Sampadan Ate Path-Nirdharan)*, 54-58. Some editions have printed as many as 41 vārs, one reason for the inconsistencies in number is that a 41st vār is sometimes included in Gurdas Bhalla's corpus, but was clearly written by another poet calling himself "Gurdas," as it covers the life of tenth Sikh leader, Guru Gobind Singh. For more on the history of the numbering of the vārs, see Singh, *Bhai Gurdas: Sikhī De Pahile Viākhīākār*, 34-6.

that, in the early twentieth century, fringe elements in the community who were on heightened alert against heterodox elements in the tradition, dropped the Tenth Vār because of its Hindu mythological content.<sup>44</sup> The vār includes a series of Sikh re-appropriations of Vaishnava myths, has been quite controversial for its inclusion of what some consider heterodox materials. Whereas Nripinder Singh makes Teja Singh of Bhasaur to be the culprit of opposition to this vār, Pritam Singh sees Giani Lal Singh Sangrur the “one fundamentalist ... who led the campaign against the 10th Vār being retained in [Gurdas’s corpus].”<sup>45</sup> Sant Singh Sekhon blames Sikh scholar Sahib Singh.<sup>46</sup> Mindful of such stances against the Tenth Vār, literary scholars have come to its defense, providing scriptural basis for its use of mythology and arguing for its utilitarian use of Puranic materials.<sup>47</sup> Another reason, however, for the confusion is that the 40<sup>th</sup> Vār is simply absent in some manuscripts, perhaps due to its late composition.

The very existence of 40 vārs in Gurdas’s corpus speaks to his understanding

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<sup>44</sup> Singh, *The Sikh Moral Tradition: Ethical Perceptions of the Sikhs in the Late Nineteenth / Early Twentieth Century*, 75 fn 8.

<sup>45</sup> Singh, *Bhai Gurdas*, 36.

<sup>46</sup> “Some scholars like Sahib Singh are unwilling to accept the tenth Vār in which legends and tales mentioned above, are told, as the works of Bhai Gurdas. But their echoes being heard even in the Gurubāṇī, it should not cause much doubt about its authenticity.” Sant Singh Sekhon and Kartar Singh Duggal, *A History of Punjabi Literature* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1992), 158.

<sup>47</sup> Sekhon, *Bhai Gurdas: Ik Adhiain*, 96, 104-6. Bhalla, *Varān Bhai Gurdās (Sampadan Ate Path-Nirdharan)*, 35.



of himself in Sikh tradition. There are 40 stanzas in the first composition of the Adi Granth, Guru Nanak's *Jap*,<sup>48</sup> as well as in Guru Amardas's *Anand*.<sup>49</sup> Both of these compositions are part of Sikh daily prayers, and Gurdas may have followed the number to 40. Scholars have noted that Guru Amardas's compositions are often close to Guru Nanak's and appear to be commentarial.<sup>50</sup> Gurdas's compositions often utilize Guru Nanak's phrases,<sup>51</sup> and as well as those of his uncle, Guru Amardas.<sup>52</sup>

**Language and genre.** According to Sant Singh Sekhon, the whole of the vārs are written in unadulterated Punjabi idiom, the mother tongue of the common folk of Punjab and utilize the dialect of central Punjab (Majha), which is not utilized even by the Gurus.<sup>53</sup> The literature of the Sikh canon before Gurdas used a Punjabi infused with more universal, pan-North-Indian language, making Gurdas one of the Punjabi language's pioneering writers.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> The 40 stanzas include the prologue (*ik oankar, satinam...*) and epilogue (*salok: pavan guru...*), GG 1-8.

<sup>49</sup> GG 917-922.

<sup>50</sup> Singh, *Gurbani Dian Viakhia Paranalian*, 23-36. Mann, *The Making of Sikh Scripture*, 18.

<sup>51</sup> For example, compare Gurdas's v2.19, with Guru Nanak's "shalok" on GG 8. Compare, Gurdas's use of "hathu dei" (v6.12, v8.24) with Guru Nanak's (GG 1245).

<sup>52</sup> For example, compare Gurdas's contention that the Sikh path is sharper than a double-edge sword (*khanda*, v9.2, v11.5) with that of Guru Amardas (GG 918).

<sup>53</sup> Sekhon, *Bhai Gurdas: Ik Adhiain*, 5, 111-2.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 107-10, 13.

Not only is Gurdas one of the few writers to use the vār for religious writings, he is the most prolific poet in the vār genre. According to Piara Singh Padam, vārs constitute a genre of poetry unique to the Punjabi language. Vār literature seems to have a rich, particularly oral, tradition before the Gurus take it up as a literary genre in Sikh scripture.<sup>55</sup> Nine vārs are alluded to in the Sikh scripture, which must have been popular in the sixteenth century, but which are no longer extant.<sup>56</sup>

A vār is defined by two characteristics, the first of which is the stanza form known as *paurī*, in which all lines rhyme. There are as many as 30 or 40 types of *paurīs* in the old literature: with various rhythmic configurations and no limitations for line numbering, leaving the genre open for poets to innovate with regard metrical scheme.<sup>57</sup> The secondary characteristic of vārs is that they describe war, and include stories about bravery, or the accounts of battle. However, this condition is not necessary for religious vārs. Gurbaksh Singh Shant makes the important point that Gurdas probably consciously chose the vār genre in order to evoke zeal and enthusiasm in his audience. The bellicose tempo of Gurdas's vārs underscores their message of battle in the spiritual realm: he portrays Nanak as a world conqueror,

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<sup>55</sup> Piara Singh Padam, ed., *Punjabī Varān* (Patiala: Kalam Mandir, 1980), 90. Padam points to a seventeenth century reference to the thirteenth or fourteenth century vār of Amir Khusro, describing an important battle of pre-Mughal India. Most other references to vārs, however, refer to oral literature singing of the valor of great warriors and rulers.

<sup>56</sup> Please Padam's examples: Ibid., 19-24.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 11-16. Padam says that the *paurī* is the body of the vār, and the tale of bravery is its spirit.

and elsewhere uses a number of war-like metaphors.<sup>58</sup>

The organization of Gurdas's vārs shows that he cared greatly about their order, and how each vār was structured. The clearest case to understand Gurdas's stanza organization is Vār 15, in which the first three stanzas lay out what the next sixteen expand upon in greater detail. Gurdas unpacks an argument through stanzas: the Guru has everything the Sikh needs, human life is a waste without him, and thereby Sikhs should never consider turning their back on the Guru; moreover there are a myriad of reasons why Sikhs should re-dedicate themselves to the Sikh cause.

Most of Gurdas's vārs begin with an invocation, or what commentators have called a *mangalācharaṇ*.<sup>59</sup> In Gurdas's vārs this means a short appeal to, or mention of, God or the Guru. For example:

The divine, taking form, manifested as wind, water, and fire  
Splitting land from sky, He lit the moon and stars  
Fixing four forms of sustenance, He turned them over to 8,400,000 life  
forms  
In each type of life exist uncountable, unparalleled beings  
Human birth is difficult to achieve; The Guru's protection assures  
liberation  
Engrossed in the holy congregation and word, with loving devotion:  
contemplate holy wisdom!

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<sup>58</sup> Shant, *Bhai Gurdās Diān Varān Da Alochanatmak Adhiain*, 221-5.

<sup>59</sup> I have found there to be 20 *mangalācharaṇ* amongst Gurdas's vārs, these are the opening stanzas for vārs 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 14, 18, 19, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 29, 30, 37, and 39. It may be that the other twenty vārs do not have *mangalācharaṇ*s because they were meant to be read with continuity to the previous vār. Therefore, Vārs 1 and 2 would be considered continuous; Vār 3 would be considered independent; and Vārs 4 and 5 would be considered continuous, etc.

The benevolent are the Guru's beloved (v4.1)

The stanza opens with the epithet for God, Oankar, which is the first word (following the numeral 1) in the Guru Granth. This *mangalācharaṇ* posits an understanding of cosmology from creation to its culmination in the Sikh tradition's basic beliefs: participation in the holy congregation, contemplation of divine wisdom, and its enactment through acts of altruistic benevolence. In invoking such concepts, the *mangalācharaṇ* puts the divine first and acts as a marker for a beginning. The *mangalācharaṇ* is positive in its attitude and thereby distinct from the theme of the rest of the vār: which, in this case, focuses on the historical and soteriological value of suffering.

### **The Kabitts**

Gurdas wrote over 600 four-line poems in Brajbhāshā. Gurdas's Brajbhāshā poems are of high literary quality, and their focus is on expounding Sikh ideology and conceptualizations of religious experience, and explain Sikh and non-Sikh practices.<sup>60</sup> The poet packs each stanza semantically tight, while adhering to the rhythmic requirements of his genre. These factors, along with his use of alliteration and complex internal rhyming, complicate the task of translation of the Brajbhāshā pieces.

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<sup>60</sup> For an excellent essay on Gurdas's Brajbhāshā works, please see Padam, "Bhai Gurdas Di Hindi Rachna," 215-24. According to Padam, Gurdas is one of Punjab's most important Brajbhāshā writers during the Mughal period, even though he is known more extensively for his Punjabi poetry.

Perhaps because of the difficulty of their language, the kabitts have been less popular, recently, in Sikh circles than the more vernacular Punjabi vārs. Like the vārs, the kabitts also expound Sikh religious concepts and experiences. Unlike the vārs, the kabitts do not include systematic accounts of the Sikh Gurus and non-Sikh religious figures, mention by name individual members of the Sikh community, and provide the geographical locations and social backgrounds of those Sikhs.

**Language and genres.** Scholars of Hindi languages have yet to take up Gurdas's works, and the study of Gurdas's career could benefit from their linguistic assessment of the kabitts.<sup>61</sup> Future scholarly attention in this direction could help clarify Gurdas's tendencies, and possibly provide insight into his training and influence as a poet of non-Punjabi languages. However, compared to any of his predecessors in the Sikh canon, Gurdas's poetry is the most prolific in its use of proto-Hindi languages.

During Gurdas's life, this language, along with its closely related dialect Avadhi, dominated high literary culture in Hindi-speaking areas of North India and outside the borders of where they were spoken.<sup>62</sup> Allison Busch, a scholar of Mughal-era Hindi and Urdu literatures, argues that the 1600s were an important

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<sup>61</sup> Take, for example, Kabitt 205. In the first line, Gurdas uses the Punjabi pronoun “*mere*” instead of a more Brajbhāshā-like choice, such as “*more*”. In the fourth line, he uses the Punjabi word for eyes, “*akhān*” in lieu of a Hindi word for the same.

<sup>62</sup> Avadhi works, like Tulsidas' *Rāmcharitmānas* and works of Sufi poets from “parallel literatures” to Brajbhāshā. Rupert Snell, *The Hindi Classical Tradition: A Braj Bhasha Reader* (London: SOAS, 1991), ix, 30, 33.

time for spread of Brajbhāshā literature. The vernacular language of the region associated with the Vaishnava incarnation Krishan, Brajbhāshā had been reserved for devotional songs. However, in the early seventeenth century it saw a vast expansion into secular spheres and courtly, elite discourse, where it replaced Sanskrit through innovation and imitation.<sup>63</sup> Paralleling Brajbhāshā's use in Krishan-worship, the language Avadhi was spoken in the nearby area associated with the divine incarnation of Ram, and is the language of Tulsidas's masterpiece *Rāmcharitmānas*. Muslim mystics also composed literature in this language. Finally, Sādhūkārī ("what holy men speak") was a composite language in which a variety of religious literatures were written. Composers of Sikh scripture used Sādhūkārī in the holy text, along with Punjabi. Gurdas's appropriation of Brajbhāshā followed an increased use of proto-Hindi dialects in the poetry of his literary predecessor, the fifth Guru (Arjan), and set off the widespread use of Brajbhāshā for Sikh literature that lasted until the twentieth century.

Although, Gurdas' Brajbhāshā compositions are known by the title "kabitt-savaiyye", the poems themselves are made up of a number of different distinct sub-genres, overwhelmingly dominated by the four-line kabitt style. According to Rupert Snell, a leading scholar of Brajbhāshā literature, kabitts and savaiyyas both

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<sup>63</sup> Allison Busch, "The Anxiety of Innovation: The Practice of Literary Science in the Hindi/ Riti Tradition," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 24, no. 2 (2004).

belong to the same category of Indian poetic meter.<sup>64</sup> The first eight stanzas of Gurdas's Brajbhāshā corpus are not actually quatrains, but composites of twenty-four smaller poems.<sup>65</sup> Other than a handful of savaīyyās, the few remaining poems are other types of metered quatrains, or *chhands*.<sup>66</sup>

Until the early twentieth century, most manuscripts and published editions of Gurdas's Brajbhāshā poems contained only 556 of them. In the 1930s, Bhai Vir Singh uncovered two rare manuscripts, together containing over 100 distinct, previously unknown Brajbhāshā poems under headings attributing them to Bhai Gurdas Bhalla. In his 1940 publication of these poems, Vir Singh argues that consistency between the two parts (the first 556 and the second 119 that he discovered) are in terms of themes, language, and phraseology point to the identity

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<sup>64</sup> Moreover, Each line of kabitt quatrains “has 31 or 32 syllables, whose value is not proscribed: counting is simply by the number of syllables, regardless of length. A caesura usually follows the 16th syllable, where the line is usually split graphically on the printed page; secondary caesuras may appear after the 8th and/or 24th syllables is immaterial, and the main caesuras are shown by line-breaks...” Snell refers here to the category of Varnik meters, which “are measured according to the number and arrangement of syllables (varna) to the line.” All lines rhyme in both kabitts and savaīyyās and they share “a characteristic rhythm of single long syllables alternating with paired short syllables”. [Snell, *The Hindi Classical Tradition: A Braj Bhasha Reader*, 26-28.]

<sup>65</sup> *Doharās, soraṭhās, and chhappās.*

<sup>66</sup> Savaīyyā literally means “larger by one quarter” and in literature, this term refers to “a Hindi quatrain of dactylic structure: each line includes seven feet, together with one or more prefixed or suffixed syllables (the number and arrangement of these being the same throughout the verse).” [R. S. McGregor, ed., *Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 996.]. Jhulna chandis is a style of poetry that is frequently used in the later Dasam Granth: “also known as Manidhar Savaīyya. It has been freely used by the poets of medieval period and one kind of it is also included in matrik metres.” (“Dasam Granth,” C.H. Loehlin and Rattan Singh Jaggi, Singh, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Sikhism*, 514-31.)

of their author.<sup>67</sup>

Oankar Singh, editor of the recent edition of Gurdas's Brajbhāshā works, says his search for the original manuscript source of these later kabitts was not a fruitful endeavor and these manuscripts may have been destroyed in a 1947 fire.<sup>68</sup> Recent editions of Gurdas's Brajbhāshā poems have incorporated Vir Singh's findings, bringing the total to 675. Because nine of the poems in the second batch published by Vir Singh are nearly identical to ones from the first batch, Darshan Singh, accounting for this overlap, argues that the actual number of stanzas of Brajbhāshā poetry attributable to Gurdas is 666.<sup>69</sup>

**Distinctions From Vārs.** Whereas the vārs are 40 long poems with a discernible structure, a clear system in the organization of the Brajbhāshā quatrains is difficult to more difficult to find.<sup>70</sup> Many kabitts are painted with the emotions of *shingār ras*, in which the poet takes on the persona of a young bride preparing to meet her beloved. There are dozens of kabitts in which Gurdas chastises the practices of the Vaishnavas. The remainder of the kabitts is more positive in scope.

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<sup>67</sup> Bhalla, *Kabitt Bhai Gurdas: Dusra Skand Saṭīk*.

<sup>68</sup> For details see: Singh, ed., *Kabitt Savaiyye Bhai Gurdas, Anukramanika Te Kosh*, xli-xlii. Oankar Singh mistakenly thinks there was only one manuscript, when Vir Singh himself says he used two.

<sup>69</sup> Singh, *Bhai Gurdas: Sikhī De Pahile Viākhiākār*, 36-7.

<sup>70</sup> In lieu of finding a structure to the kabitts, Bhai Sewa Singh has limited a number of themes that run through the kabitts: stanzas in praise of the true guru, stanzas in praise of the Gurmukh, the divine's perfection, praise of the true Guru, definition of what it means to be his disciple, etc (Please see: Singh, *Kabitt Savaiyye Bhai Gurdas Ji Saṭīk*, 13-38).



Some discuss the equation of the Guru with the Supreme Being, or the importance of the divine word and congregational worship. Others expound ethical stances, and still others testify to the bliss of religious achievement on the Sikh path.<sup>71</sup> Some of the kabitts numbered in the 570s read like secular love poetry: one would not be aware of religious meaning loaded in them, had they not been penned by a religious writer like Gurdas. Kabitts 623 and 624 provide rare, contemplative stanzas amongst Gurdas's compositions.

Another way that the kabitts are distinct from the vārs is that they are more methodical in extrapolating a sophisticated, philosophical method of how the Sikh practitioner ought to approach his or her spirituality. For example, Kabitt 228 describes the mind: it is like a husband in a house, but has eight wives, each of whom have five sons. Each of those sons has wives and sons, so on and so forth. The idea conveyed is that the one mind is subdivided into a number of minor faculties, explaining the difficulty in controlling it and establishing the necessity of the Guru's help in getting past this fundamental problem, which is laid out in later kabitts of this section, like 234. In Kabitt 235, Gurdas states why implementing particular ethical prohibitions are important for the re-integration of the practitioner, and how they can be pursued. Kabitt 236 and 237 signal a typical "self-deprecating" conclusion to a section, indicating that the last dozen or so

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<sup>71</sup> Such stanzas are grouped close together as in the following kabitts: 203-4, 207-12, 345-8, 471-6, 479, 493-4, 626-7, 650-6, 663-70.

kabitts were consciously bunched together to explain how to understand Sikh spirituality.

Kabitts between 441 and 492 are polemics against Hindu practices, particularly those of Vaishnavas. Gurdas is concerned with three types of rivals to his community: those who believe in Guru Nanak, but not Hargobind; those who patronize the Jogis; and those who follow the Vaishnavas. It is interesting that the harshest polemics against the Vaishnavas come in Brajbhāshā. The Sikhs confront their rivals head on, in their territories, and in their own sacred language.

It is hard to support the idea that the kabitts were written during Gurdas's travels to the east of Punjab. However, internal evidence indicates that they may have been written *for* Sikh congregations in those areas. As argued above, they are unique in their polemics against Vaishnavism. Moreover, they utilize an eastern dialect, and mention trade and travel in abundance.<sup>72</sup> They articulate a desire to return to the homeland.<sup>73</sup> Gurdas writes about *bidesh*, the far away land: like the migratory bird that will return to her nest, the Sikh lives in the desire to live under the Guru's graces (k515). He is ebullient that there are countless Sikhs in countless congregations (k193). In my readings, these texts reveal that the poet was consciously speaking to the important Sikh congregations engaged in commerce and

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<sup>72</sup> See k118, 454, 455, 474.

<sup>73</sup> See k400, 401, 500, 520, 578.

bureaucratic employment in the Ganga-Jamna river basins.<sup>74</sup>

## Conclusion

As a scribe of the Sikh scripture, Gurdas would have internalized its contents, and his writings underscore his own understanding as extending the Sikh literary tradition. Traditional explanations for Gurdas's absence from Sikh scriptural canon require re-evaluation. Closer reading of internal and external evidence suggest his compositions came after the compilation of the Kartarpur Pothis in 1604, and likely began after Guru Arjan's 1606 demise. Gurdas's corpus legitimates the authority of Guru Hargobind as supreme Sikh leader and undermines all other claimants in no uncertain terms. While responding to a sectarian crisis, his primary goal is to articulate a positive vision of Sikh religious life in two distinct genres of poetry. The remainder of this dissertation builds a description of Sikh life in Gurdas's time from a close reading of both genres of poetry.

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<sup>74</sup> That Khatriis traded and worked in the Mughal bureaucracy during this time and in this place has been well documented. Please see: C. A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen, and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770-1870*, 1st ed., *Cambridge South Asian Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 140, John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire*, ed. Gordon Johnson, *The New Cambridge History of India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 71. Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*, 6.

## Chapter Three

### Three Shelters: Early Sikh Beliefs

#### Belief in Gurdas's Works

Gurdas's elucidation of Sikh beliefs is a testament to how Sikhs set themselves as a unified community in distinction to other communities in the early seventeenth century.<sup>1</sup> For one, Gurdas does this *via negativa*, by strictly proscribing belief in non-Sikh entities.<sup>2</sup> For example, Gurdas says, a real Sikh does not believe in signs and omens, the zodiac, incantations, magic, auspicious and inauspicious moments, and astrology (v5.8). Gurdas writes of how the schismatic Sikh group that rivals his own practices a “false faith,” and says that belief in shrines and filial piety is also “false”.<sup>3</sup> Sikhs place none of this kind of false belief in other religions' notions of hells or in the negative outcomes of their actions (k409.1).

More fervently, he requires from co-religionists a faithful “acceptance” of the

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<sup>1</sup> The words used for belief here are *bharosā*, *visvās* or *bisvās*, and *manṇā*. See also his use of *shardhā* in k180.3 and k507.3.

<sup>2</sup> As a positive action, Gurdas rather weakly implores his co-religionists *to believe*. For example, he says that we ought believe that the Perfect Being exists in all people (k108.1). We ought to believe that teaching a Sikh one word of the revelation is equivalent in merit to undertaking a pilgrimage (k560.4).

<sup>3</sup> See v36.7.1; v27.9.5, v8.15.4, v5.10.5.

divine will—a faith that whatever unfolds is in accordance with that will. A proper Sikh accepts, or follows, his Guru’s words and no one else’s.<sup>4</sup> One puts the Guru’s words, or faith in the Guru, in one’s heart (k21.4, k138.3). A true Sikh accepts the Sikh way (k149.1), and belief is also the effect of living that life (k181.1, k227.1). The one who accepts and enacts the Guru’s teachings (*gurmati sati kari*) is released from the grip of false beliefs and doubts (*bharam*) and finds a deep faith (*bisvās*) in his heart (k26). The bee is intoxicated by hovering around lotus flowers, engrossed in a state of peace with a wondrous faith in its heart (k294). Similarly, the Sikhs who practice in the congregation find the same state of peace (k125). The Gurmukh enjoys love’s liquor and experiences a wondrous faith (k322). Drinking the feet-wash of pious saints provides the antidote to time’s venom, and allows the drinker to overcome false belief of “otherness”.<sup>5</sup>

The strong faith an initiated Sikh derives from practice becomes a sign of his or her religiosity. Walking the path of the Gurmukhs brings spiritual success: doubts are left behind, and a wondrous faith (*bisam bisvās*) springs up in the heart of the one who unites his or her thoughts, speech, and action (k89). The pious find themselves in a state of perfect certainty (*pūran pratīti*), and faith.<sup>6</sup> This faith is one

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<sup>4</sup> Divine will is an important part of Gurdas’s belief system and will be covered in Chapter Six (Sikh ascendance): v.9.13.5, v1.13.3, v7.1.6, v14.6.6, v20.13, v29.13.5. Accepting the Guru’s words is covered in the following excerpts: v11.23.7, v27.17.4, v28.9.5, v29.20.3, v32.1.3, k87.2, k374.4.

<sup>5</sup> Gurdas says, *kul akulin bhei dubidha nivariai* (k127). See the chapter on Early Sikh Practices for more about this ritual.

<sup>6</sup> See k42. See also k62, k92.

of the ineffable effects of being absorbed in the divine word amidst the congregation of Sikhs (k251). Without the readiness to surrender himself to Guru and community, one is not a Sikh:

If on seeing the flame you seek not to be merged like the moth,  
then call yourself not the “Guru’s Sikh”  
If on hearing the hunter’s horn you seek it not,  
without the Guru’s word you waste this life  
If you crave not feet-nectar like the rain bird needs a drop,  
then consider your faithless heart not that of the Guru’s slave...  
(*gur dās*, k551)

That is to say, a Sikh cannot simply call himself a Sikh by “attesting” to believe. He must put his Gurus’ teachings into practice and then abandon the self in preparation for total surrender.

**Three shelters.** In the remainder of this chapter we probe the major beliefs of the tradition that emerge from Gurdas’s writings. These are organized according to four distinct, yet overlapping, themes. First, we discuss how Gurdas conceives of the Deity. Second, third, and fourth, we investigate Gurdas’s “three shelters”: Guru, *sangat* (congregation), and *bānī* (holy word).<sup>7</sup> Each of these three “shelters” is at the fore of Gurdas’s theorization of religious experience:

The Guru is the face of the Perfect Being — Unfathomable,  
Indestructible  
The Guru’s word, residing in the holy congregation, manifests the  
Transcendent One  
The saints’ society is the Realm of Truth, proceeding in love and  
devotion  
The Guru reveals his teachings to all four castes... (from v9.1, themes

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<sup>7</sup> The term “shelter” comes from Gurdas’s hagiography of Guru Nanak. While conversing with and castigating a band of Jogis in an episode of Gurdas’s hagiography, Guru Nanak proclaims that there is no shelter (*ot*) other than the guru, the congregation (*sangat*), and the divine word (*bānī*, v1.42).

emphasized)

We will investigate the beliefs Gurdas posits about the Guru, the first shelter, exploring the Sikh Gurus' relationship with the divine, and amongst themselves. The second shelter is the scriptural form of revelation, and the third is the divine's revelation in history in the form of the Sikh community. In this investigation we will inquire as to how these core beliefs function in the construction of communal boundaries.

We will conclude the chapter with an analysis of the three shelters (Guru, word, and community) and their conflation in Gurdas's understanding of revelation in history. That is, congregation and word share in the Guru's divinely derived authority. A particular constellation of the concepts of God, Guru, congregation, and word provide the definitional structure to Sikh tradition. In a later chapter on Gurdas's vision of Sikh ascendance, we will investigate the implications this has for Sikh self-perception and the role of the community in its context and in history.

## **Divinity**

*Oankar* is Gurdas's favorite epithet for the divine, and was the epithet from Guru Nanak's own compositions' invocation.<sup>8</sup> *Oankar*, more commonly referred to in Sikh tradition as *Kartar* (or *Karta Purakh*, both meaning "creator"), is active in the history of the universe:

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<sup>8</sup> See Mann, *The Making of Sikh Scripture*, 37. Though *Oankar* is the most common epithet, we will use *Kartar* in this dissertation.

Oankar, taking form, manifested as wind, water, and fire  
Splitting land from sky, He lit the moon and stars  
Fixing four forms of sustenance, He turned them over to 8,400,000 life  
forms  
In each type of life exist uncountable, unparalleled beings ...<sup>9</sup>

Kartar intervenes in human affairs, and protects His saints.<sup>10</sup> He is the source of all time, history, and human developments. All religions, even if they are today misguided, actually derive from Kartar (v40.9).

The paradox of the divine's absolute transcendence and immanence looms large in Sikh thinking, and its persistence is welcome in the tradition: several early Sikh writers are blissfully content with the conclusion that the divine's ways are mysteries.<sup>11</sup> Gurdas builds on this notion of paradox. He underscores Kartar's all-pervading nature in Vār 2: He is the permeating substance, closest to all things, its essence, and yet so subtle as to be completely removed. This mystery is known only to the Gurmukhs, who are delighted by the permeation. Kartar Himself is the mirror, as well as the viewer (v2.1), He is musical performer and audience (v2.2), Himself the cook as well as the tasty meal (v2.3).

Such ideas, steeped in esotericism and mystery, echo similar notions in the kabitts describing Kartar:

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<sup>9</sup> From v4.1. I choose to use male pronouns for Kartar as a matter of convention, though divinity is clearly beyond gender in Sikh conception.

<sup>10</sup> See especially Vārs 1 and 10 for divine intervention in human affairs. Later in the dissertation we will treat this aspect of divinity in greater detail.

<sup>11</sup> For more on earlier Sikh ideas about the divine paradoxes, see Singh, *The Name of My Beloved: Verses of the Sikh Gurus*, 2-17. Shackle and Mandair, eds., *Teachings of the Sikh Gurus: Selections from the Sikh Scriptures*, xxvi-xxxiv.



Beginningless beginning, and endless end  
shoreless limit, bottomless  
Measureless measure, and moreover innumerable reckoning  
inestimable count, weightless  
Uncontainable limit, inaccessible  
unperceivable, invaluable  
Highest awe, astonishment  
beyond wonder: the Guru's ways are the ways of the Supreme  
(k71, see also k98)

Kartar's compassion is a common theme in Gurdas's poems: He is like water to earth, and like water to wood; water nourishes a tree and even when the tree becomes boat-wood, the water does not let it sink (k381). He provides support to the unsupported, and is a compassionate being providing pleasure to those who seek His Name (k387).

Underscoring Kartar's absolute transcendence is one of Gurdas's special poetic skills. He expresses astonishment at the wonder of creation, its unity, and its infinity:

The picture of creation is most wondrous! Most strange!  
Unity! Yet multifaceted diversity!  
Sight placed in eyes, hearing in ears  
smell in nostrils, tongues taste and talk  
Within each sense and yet totally distinct from each  
one sense knows not the other, all are difficult to fathom  
This painting is fathomless, how can we know the Artist?  
He's not this, not that, nor the other; I bow, I bow, I bow! (k232)

The unknowable nature of Kartar provides a sublime opportunity for devotional praise. Something as small as a sesame seed, or an ant, can take a myriad of different forms: if the story of a tiny part of creation is difficult to describe, then how can one begin to describe the infinitude of the Creator (k273, k274)?

Ultimately Kartar cannot be understood. He is manifest and unmanifest, mysterious to the utmost (k36, k81). Kartar's play is wondrous: sometimes He manifests as Sarvan, obedient son of lore, and sometimes He slays the enemies of His devotees as a roaring man-lion.<sup>12</sup> The uniqueness of each divinely created being is beyond human comprehension (k342).

**A strict monotheism.** Gurdas repudiates the Vaishnava concept of divine descent: Kartar does not incarnate.<sup>13</sup> The ten *avtārs* (“descents,” or “incarnations”) of Vishnu have no knowledge of the Perfect Lord, and themselves are not liberated beings (k21.4). It is better to stay quiet than to attribute human incarnation to the Transcendent Being, which constitutes blasphemy (*nindā*, k555, k671).

In the kabitts, particularly, Gurdas sets his monotheistic theology in contradistinction to those of polytheists. Gurdas lays out a well-developed argument against the worship of what he considers to be minor deities. He writes that the water from one well is difficult to extract and it waters only one field; neither bird nor traveler can access the water without cups. In the same way, the gods can only provide the limited boons of which they are capable, whereas the Guru's fruits are unlimited as he is the face of the Transcendent Lord (k451). In

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<sup>12</sup> These refer to stories from the Indian tradition about Sarvan and Harnakash, an avtar of Vishnu (k436). A one-to-one translation for “monotheism” is difficult to extract from Gurdas's works, but the oneness of divinity is a constant theme. For example, Gurdas's writes that the divine is Himself the slate, Himself the pen, and Himself the writer (1.22). However, in one instance, Gurdas does use the Muslim term *wajud* to refer to the divine unity (v39.11).

<sup>13</sup> In the Vaishnava conception, “Vishnu is the supreme Lord who manifests himself in the world in times of darkness when *dharma* [“ethical behavior”] has disappeared from view.” (Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism* (Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press, 2006; reprint, Tenth), 115-7.)

another biting polemic, Gurdas argues that the One True God has no day of the week named after him, no month, or week. People say “this is the birth day of Krishan,” and “this is the birth day of Ram,” but the One-from-no-womb has no day, so what good are such birthdays?<sup>14</sup> The next kabitt adds that only fools worship the Transcendent Lord in the form of stone (k485).

**God and Guru.** In Sikh ideology, the relationship between the Sikh Guru(s) and Kartar, and amongst the Gurus themselves, provide a rich complex of beliefs. These beliefs are bound up in the demand of exclusivity of allegiance that the community places on its practitioners. Kartar is the ultimate paradox, understood by humans with great difficulty and only through the grace of the Guru; intellectual understanding is limited, the real understanding is experienced and enacted. As such, the Guru is an extension of Kartar, and reveals scripture and history according to the divine plan. The true understanding of this mystery is available only to the loyal practitioner.

For Gurdas, part of Kartar’s mysterious play is that He is wrapped up in the identity of the Sikh Guru. The Primal One has called himself “Gobind,” a reference to the short form of Guru Hargobind’s name (k7). “Gobind” and Guru are like warp and woof—inseparable, yet distinct and interlinked (k54). Guru and Kartar are like tree and seed, the Sikhs are the fruits of this tree (k55). The Guru-God relationship is one like son and father, warp and woof, and ultimately

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<sup>14</sup> The phrase used is *janam din* (k484). Gurdas would see no contradiction between this critique and his support for the celebration of the Gurus’ holy days (*gurupurabs*). The thrust of his critique is the non-incarnating nature of Kartar.

mysterious.<sup>15</sup>

The first stanza of the kabitts asserts that Kartar is both Primal Being and primal Guru; the two are identical and yet paradoxically distinct (k1).<sup>16</sup> In Vār 1, Gurdas uses the word avtar as part of his descriptions of the processes of history's unfolding and Kartar's hand in it. In each age, the true Guru incarnates to save the world and propel history (v1.48). Avtars descended in the previous ages, but they were caught up in egotism, and their own worship (v1.5, v1.15). Moreover, the true Guru's descent is necessary for teaching Kartar's righteous message (v1.17). The spiritual beings that came in contact with Guru Nanak understood him to be the avtar to redeem this fourth cosmic, Dark Age (v1.29).<sup>17</sup>

**A fruitful paradox.** How do we resolve the paradox of Gurdas being vehemently against avtars and yet stating that the Guru is the divine form? Gurdas's notion of divine incarnation parallels his concept of divine revelation in the Guru and in the congregation. Kartar participates in history, but, for Gurdas, His participation is distinct from the way that other religious traditions—

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<sup>15</sup> See k56. In his clarification of Gurdas's beliefs, J. S. Grewal has also noticed that Gurdas sees each Sikh guru and Kartar as one, and all the Gurus as ultimate spiritual and worldly leaders: slander of the Gurus is the lowest of actions; Nanak is the "world teacher" (*jagat guru*) who has brought his superior lessons to rescue the world in the Age of Darkness; the sixth Guru may be different from his predecessors, but is "bearing an unbearable burden" for the sake of the world. J. S. Grewal, *Sikh Ideology, Polity, and Social Order* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1996), 32, 33-4, 36, 37-8.

<sup>16</sup> Gurdas is very conscious of how rivals may misinterpret this. In the same stanza, Gurdas attacks Vaishnava mythology, which focuses on divine incarnation, saying that even Seshnag (Vishnu's eternal serpent) cannot comprehend Kartar, who is known only through the true Guru.

<sup>17</sup> The perfected beings (*siddhs*), to which Gurdas refers, are creatures of Nath Yogi lore, residing in mountain caves, mountain tops, or in the upper atmosphere. For more on these concepts see: David Gordon White, *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India* ([S.I.]: Univ of Chicago Pr, 1996), 327-34.

particularly Vaishnavas—conceive of incarnation.

For example, Gurdas does not make the case that Kartar literally embodies Himself into any person. Rather, light, vision, and illumination are key concepts in Gurdas's exposition of the Guru's nature. The Guru illuminates the way by bestowing divine knowledge.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, sound is also important: in Gurdas's concept of the holy word, sound converges with light. The Guru *shows* the vision and *sounds* the word (k35). The manifest form of Kartar is the unstruck tune of the word (k36). The Guru's revelation is sound and Veda, and the means by which the mysteries of God's play and incarnation are understood (k54).

Gurdas further develops his ideas about the Guru in Vār 3. The *shabad* (word) is the Guru's form, and the spirit of one Guru is infused in his disciple (who is the next Guru, v3.4). The Guru and Sikh are one (v3.11). All the six Sikh Gurus are one; they are of the same light (v3.12). They take away Sikhs' fears and, as kings of kings, establish the divine command on earth.

The Sikh Guru is not Kartar's first or only messenger, but is distinct. According to Gurdas, there have been many Gurus and many forms of revelation, but their messages have been jumbled, they have been lost in their own worship, and gotten off track. Guru Nanak's distinct characteristics in relation to these are his own humility and his insistence on his disciples' humility. This humility is a

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<sup>18</sup> Vār 1 utilizes several examples of illumination: Guru Nanak came to redeem the Age of Darkness, he was the moon illuminated and the dispeller of darkness (v1.26). Knowledge abounds in the Age of Darkness, but we are unable to *see* (*drishṭī*) the differences between knowledge and ignorance (v1.18). Nanak tells a Jogi, "Hey Sir, Nath, truth is the moon and falsehood is the darkness" (v1.29). The Guru's speech spreads light and darkness disappears (v1.38).

marker of the Guru's deference to Kartar's authority, and thus his authenticity as a selfless teacher, as opposed to his own self-interest.

Gurdas acknowledges that Guru Nanak clearly enunciated the revelatory aspect of Kartar in the form of the Guru.<sup>19</sup> He did not reject other forms of revelation,<sup>20</sup> but privileged his own "special relationship" with the Primal Being, and taught his own disciples with the authority and knowledge that came with the relationship.<sup>21</sup> His actions in the world are revelatory as well. God's intercession in human affairs was an accepted part of the Sikh beliefs by Gurdas's time.<sup>22</sup> His successors continue that revelation and share the divine revelatory aspect in their nature. This is why to slander them or to rival them would be the most offensive of actions, deserving the harshest punishment in the hereafter.

## The Guru

Thus, the Sikh Guru is Kartar's knowledge-giving, revelatory, world redeeming and guiding aspect. Calling the Guru a form of Kartar, or saying that the congregation contains Kartar's presence is not to reduce the divine to those entities, but rather elevate those entities via the literary trope of "incarnation". Vār

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<sup>19</sup> I refer here to Guru Nanak's statement in the Jap: *Gurmukh nāḍang Gurmukh vedang* (GG 2). Gurdas repeats this idea in k54.

<sup>20</sup> Mann, *The Making of Sikh Scripture*, 4,141.

<sup>21</sup> Mann, *Sikhism*, 15.

<sup>22</sup> For example, see the fourth guru's hymn: *hari jug jug bhagat upāyā* (M4 GG 454)

1's employment of the idea of avtar is thus better explained as a literary device to portray the Gurus' greatness and connection to Kartar.<sup>23</sup>

Gurdas uses incarnation as metaphor for emphasizing the Guru's power. In this metaphor, the Guru is a human veneer of the divine. By meeting the Guru, the deeper and profound formless Kartar can be found. The Guru's protection is better than all other religious practices combined. The true Guru transforms Sikhs, and Sikhs transform other Sikhs.

The Guru is an expression of Kartar's compassion. The Compassionate Lord (*dātār prabh*) sent Guru Nanak to help soothe the suffering world (v1.23). Kartar is the honor of the honorless: Himself the field, and Himself its watchman (v26.8). Kartar entered the perfect Guru into human history out of compassion for suffering in the Age of Darkness. The perfect Guru is patient, righteous, and his congregation is the place where true religion is practiced (*sachi dharamsāl*).

Throughout his works, Gurdas upholds both the Guru's divine mission and a strict interpretation of monotheism. The Primal Being had His holy Name worshipped through the true Guru. Uniting all four castes, the Guru created the divine realm (*sach khand*) in the holy congregation (v29.1). Amidst his critique of the worship of Hindu deities, Gurdas clarifies the Sikh position of divine manifestation:

If the Perfect Being is complete in Himself and there is no one like  
Him, then how can there be many icons of Him?

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<sup>23</sup> See specifically stanzas v1.17, 1.29, 1.38, 1.48.

In each heart, the Perfect Being sees, hears, and speaks;  
    why does He not manifest in the icon and talk to us?  
House to house, pots are made of the same clay;  
    but why then are icons, made of that, venerated?  
The true Guru is the Perfect Being manifest, there is one light  
    but two forms that inspire each others' worship (k462)

The Guru is a lamp enlightened by the divine light, and his mission is to spread that light in the world. Worship of the minor deities promises only earthly boons, whereas service of the Guru grants both those and immortality: others are seasonal plants, the Guru is the evergreen tree; others are like water wells, the Guru is the River Ganga; others are clay lamps, the Guru is the moon (k456, see also k459).

Most of Gurdas's poetry is devoted to the Guru's mediating role in the relationship between divine and human realms. At the Guru's feet, under the Guru's tutelage, with the Guru's protection, achieving the highest forms of spiritual attainment, and even knowledge of Kartar, are possible. Without the Guru, no spiritual practices are worth anything.

**Characteristics.** Gurdas's kabitts sing of having audience with the Guru, the experience of which eludes description:

At first glance—my awareness went to oblivion  
    My intelligence went dumb, and my mind was no longer mindful  
My memories were forgotten and my focus was lost  
    Knowledge had no meaning, nothing was of worth  
Patience and anger were both lost  
    There was no love in love, no honor in honor  
Strange, strange happening! Wondrous wonder!  
    Most awe-some, greatest of all! (k9)

This awe speaks to the highest of spiritual experiences, available “at the Guru's feet,” referring to the shelter of his teachings. Understanding these teachings, all



senses undergo a wondrous experience:

The Guru's gaze emits an astonishing radiance  
A drop of his grace awes a million meditations  
The glow from his grin is most wondrous  
His sweet words silence a million philosophies  
There is no limit to the extent of his one favor  
So what is the measure of his endless grace?  
Treasurehouse of compassion, mercy, and peace  
Storehouse of splendor, no other is like him (k142)

These teachings are the products of love and compassion. The Guru loves his Sikhs like parents love their children; as a child cannot possibly return all his parents' love, a Sikh cannot return the Guru's infinite favor and affection (k101-2). The true Guru is a storehouse of compassion and mercy: take one step towards him, and he will return the favor a thousand fold (k111). The whole world talks of seeing the Guru, and hearing his word, so the Sikhs have a unique opportunity. The compassionate Guru is capable of making even fools understand his message (k541). Like a caring mother, the Guru keeps Sikhs protected from greed and sexual desire (k369).

The Guru explains the way to divine realization, which liberates the Sikh. This liberation is not possible by any other means (k30). Like the sun shines and dispels the stars at twilight, so is the Guru's liberating radiance (v16.7). The Guru is the redemptive force, and has ordained liberation for his pious followers (v20.3). Like the bee that does not waver from the pursuit of nectar, Gurdas says we should know that all peace, knowledge, and the highest spiritual achievements are available if we give ourselves over to the Guru's lotus feet (k222).

In return for liberation, the Guru-Sikh relationship requires commitment. The Guru makes obsolete all the boons offered by the experiences of other religions (k72). Gurdas compares religious conversion to warriors taking refuge under a king: the Guru welcomes others and gives shelter, but no other is capable of providing adequate shelter to the Guru's Sikh (k464). Some may think that taking shelter with another will redeem them, but the truth is that only the true Guru can deliver liberation in the form of the highest spiritual state (k634-5). Without the Guru, one wanders in this life and hereafter; with the Guru one is immersed in his teachings and protection (k156). Without the divine Name, the highest spiritual state is unattainable, and without the Guru, the Name is out of reach (k516). The poet has wandered through many lives, seen many heavens and hells, and now falls at the Guru's door (k422).

Compared with other sources of knowledge, the Guru's way is efficient (k405-6). Gurdas offers the metaphor of a shop: though there may be many shops in a neighborhood, selling many things, one particular shop may provide everything one needs. The true Guru is the true shopkeeper; all treasures are in his possession.<sup>24</sup> The worship of others cannot eradicate transmigrational suffering, without the Guru, liberation is not attained (k471-3). Double-commitment is not acceptable; it is like looking in two mirrors, like putting a foot in two boats, like two kings in one land (k467).

Vār 15 provides the most systematically organized praise of the Guru, and

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<sup>24</sup> Gurdas uses this metaphor often, see: k454, k455, k461.

argues for his absolute necessity—no facet of life is without him; what kind of fool would leave him? The Guru is the true emperor (*pātshāh*), true master of jog<sup>25</sup> (*nāth*), true benevolent being (*dātār*), true creator (*kartā purakh*), true banker (*sāhu*) and true doctor (*vaid*, v15.4-9). The Guru is the place of pilgrimage (*tirath*), the touchstone (*pāras*), and wish-fulfiller (*chintaman*, v15.10-14).

**Kingship.** Gurdas portrays the Guru as the true emperor, and describes religio-political elements of his court: he lives in the palace of truth, his command and standard are true, he possesses the true mint in the divine word, which is the storehouse of truth. Through his grace his subjects, the Sikhs, rule over their bodies (v26.1). The true Guru is the true king who has put the Sikhs on the royal road (*gāḍḍi rāh*, v5.13). The Guru is the protector of the community, an emperor in his own right. He is like a benevolent boat that brings us to the other shore, the sole leader of the army, the night watchman who allows the neighborhood to sleep peacefully. The true word is his standard (*nisāṇ*) and the poet's life breath belongs to him (v5.21).

The divine court is embodied in the Guru's congregation in this world, but is also Gurdas's favorite metaphor for the afterlife: the mystical place where the pious will ascend and be forever in Kartar's presence. Gurdas describes the unshakeable reign (*abichal rāji*) of the Guru's palace of truth, where the true emperor-Guru imparts true commands. The saints' society is the true throne. The word is the divine mint: it fuses all elements with the gold touchstone (v18.20). Vār 21 praises

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<sup>25</sup> Sanskrit: *yoga*.

the true Guru as king of kings, master of a fearless court (*laubāli dargāh*), and himself carefree (*vaḍā beparvāh*, v21.1). All rivals are in for a thrashing at the divine court, even the great sultans (v21.5, 21.14). The true Guru is a fearless treasurehouse, compassionate to even his enemies, a physician and true leader of the meek (v26.19). The succession of Gurus is like the royal coronations of temporal kings. Each Guru acts exactly in line with his predecessors' mission, all share the same mint, the same decree (*qutabā*), throne, and court (v26.31).

**The Gurus.** Gurdas builds on the established tradition about the Gurus' relationship with one another. In the Guru Granth, Satta and Balvand had stressed that Nanak tested his sons as well as Lehna, but only Lehna (the future Guru Angad) passed the test. This was the “reversal of the Ganga”: the Guru selected his own successor in his lifetime.<sup>26</sup> Gurdas borrows this metaphor as well as others from the bhaṭṭs: the Gurus relate to each other like father, son, and grandfather. The bhaṭṭs agree that only the best candidate inherits the office of the Guru (though they do not mention any heir by name). The bhaṭṭs were the first to write about the “house of the Sodhis” and the “clan of the Sodhis.”<sup>27</sup> Gurdas, however, is the first to articulate the belief that the Sodhi lineage will dominate the office perpetually (v1.46), which it did until the tenth Guru's death in 1708.

Guru Nanak, though sent by the compassionate Lord to redeem the world was

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<sup>26</sup> See GG 966-7.

<sup>27</sup> See GG 1407, 1406, 1407.

not only divinely blessed, but worked very hard: living an austere lifestyle, engaging in deep meditation, and traveling widely (v1.23-4). Gurdas depicts Nanak as sharp-witted and outspoken (v1.40). He was charismatic, winning over hearts around the world, and becoming the object of worship all around. He was a conscious teacher, and a community leader, leading a worldly life at Kartarpur (v1.38).

Guru Nanak chose his own successor, and passed his light on to him (v1.45). Gurdas compares the Guru-succession to that of a temporal king to underscore the continuation of one Guru's reign in the other.<sup>28</sup> The first successor, Guru Angad, retained his Guru's temporal authority, but left Kartarpur for his own town, Khadur. The immortal Amardas then earned his way to the Guru's office, and established the Sikh center in town of Goindval. Guru Ramdas was the emperor of the Sodhis, who lit the lamps in the city around the sacred pool, Amritsar. When he chose his son, Arjan, as Guru, he made the statement that the office of the Guru belonged to the Sodhis and they would not release it to anyone who is not capable of bearing its burden (v1.46-7).

Vār 24 is an ode to all six Gurus, and builds the argument for the office's legitimate succession from Guru Nanak to Guru Hargobind. Guru Nanak was the original, true emperor: carefree master, protector of the poor, striker of fear in his enemies' hearts (v24.3). Like a father passes his heritage to his son, Guru Nanak passed on his office to Guru Angad, who was master of things temporal and

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<sup>28</sup> See v26.31, as well as Singh and Singh, *Varān Bhai Gurdās Satīk*, 424.

spiritual (v24.5, v24.7). Guru Amardas's throne was unshakeable and true, his rule was immovable, and he opened the treasure-house of the divine word (v24.8, 24.12). Guru Ramdas combined governance and austerity (*rāj, jog*) reigning over this world and the next (v24.14, 24.15). He is the boat to cross the world-ocean; whosoever bathes in his tank is never defiled (v24.14). Guru Arjan filled a treasury with the Gurus' compositions (*gurbāṇī bhandār*), his standard was true and his true throne was unshakeable (v24.19). Guru Arjan was Guru Hargobind's father who passed on his legacy like fruit from a tree. Gurdas plays on divine epithets and the sixth Guru's name: the Guru is "Gobind" and "Gobind" is the Guru, no one can understand this mystery (v24.24). The form of the Guru is the holy word, manifest in the congregation (v24.25).

Gurdas's Brajbhāshā works begin with poetic invocations of the divine and each of the six Gurus. They add that Guru Nanak is the Perfect and Transcendent Being, worshipped by all deities (k2). Guru Angad was an extension of Guru Nanak's own body (a play on his name, meaning "limb") and the two were enlightened by the same light (k3). Meeting the immortal Guru Amardas (also a play on his name, meaning "immortal" or "nectar"), one finds the nectar of the divine word and attains the state of perfection (k4). The pious understand the divine mystery by chanting "Ram, Ram," and this is how Guru Ramdas merged with his teacher (k5). The son of a king is also a king, and this is how Guru Arjan received his father's legacy (k6).

After Guru Nanak, Gurdas focuses largely on Guru Hargobind. He is the

“heavy Guru” (*gur bhārī*), the army-crushing warrior-Guru, and the sixth holy man. Guru Arjan has changed bodies and presents himself as Guru Hargobind. He is a great warrior, and most benevolent (v1.48). In the kabitts, the Guru is said to be the Perfect Being, “Guru” and “Gobind” are one and the same, like warp and woof (k7). As before, Gurdas refers here to the sixth Guru’s short name.<sup>29</sup> The Lord has two names, Guru or Gobind, but he is one. In the same way, Guru Hargobind appears distinct from the divine, but they are one and the same. The One Lord manifested in human form and had Himself be called “Guru Gobind” (v25.1).

Nearly the entire 39th Vār is dedicated to Guru Hargobind and his style of leadership. It begins with an invocation to Kartar, and then Guru Hargobind’s five predecessors: Guru Nanak was the True Guru, who bore Guru Angad from his own limb. From Guru Angad, Guru Amardas attained the immortal state. Guru Arjan is a reflection of Guru Ramdas (v39.2). In the next stanza Gurdas reintroduces the sixth Guru:

The first five Masters were adept penmen, Guru Hargobind is  
incomparable  
He is emperor of the two worlds (*dīn dūnī*), unshakeable king of kings  
... The Knower-Of-Hearts is but an innocent boy (v39.3).

Gurdas continues: Guru Hargobind is the divinely-blessed preceptor (*khudai pīr*), and over his head is a royal canopy (*chhatar chandoā*, v39.4). He is the benevolent true Guru, a carefree, but wise, emperor who employs non-Sikhs in his courtly service (v39.6-9). People say, “the Guru is deceased,” but the Indestructible One,

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<sup>29</sup> See k54, as well as v24.21 and v24.24.

in the form of the sixth-generation Guru, sits amongst the Sikhs, laughing (v39.12).

**Contemporary issues.** With proper dating of the texts in mind, it is clear that Gurdas feels the need to defend some aspects of Guru Hargobind's leadership (1606-1644). Gurdas concedes that he is different from the first five Gurus, but adds that his loyal Sikhs do not see it that way, and continue to hover around his lotus feet like bees (v26.24). In the same stanza, he adds that Guru Hargobind bears an unbearable burden. In the next stanza, Gurdas says that the Guru has built a protective fence around the community, thus explaining his overt political and military stances. Gurdas says that the Emperor-Guru (Hargobind) once himself a Sikh of the Guru (Arjan) accepted his Guru's teachings. Now Guru Hargobind teaches all the holy Sikhs himself, imparting knowledge to members of all four castes while enacting the principle of detachment amidst desire (*māiā vich udās*, v7.1). Similar metaphors abound in the kabitts, although Guru Hargobind is not named specifically.<sup>30</sup>

Contemporary problems that the community was undergoing provided the basis for Gurdas to posit new beliefs. For example, embezzlement of communal funds seems to have been a problem during the schismatic times in which Gurdas was writing, and Gurdas treats such embezzlement with the seriousness of stealing from a king's treasury. He also underscores the mystical power of the Guru by explicating the effects of stealing from him. That Guru Hargobind is going to take

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<sup>30</sup> This issue will be treated in greater detail in the next chapter, but see for examples: k36, k221-4, k614.



what is his (authority of the Guru) is underscored in Vār 1 (1.47: *ditā leiye āṇṇā, aṇiditā kachhu hathi nā āvai*). In the kabitts, Gurdas provides a number of stern warnings to would-be embezzlers. For example, those who steal from the Guru's treasury are easily tracked by their stench, like the garlic-eater, and will enter hell.<sup>31</sup> However those who sacrifice mind, body, and wealth to the Guru will realize immortality (k584).

### The Word

Gurdas says that we ought to treat the Guru as the Transcendent One; his writing is Kartar's manifest form (v26.2). Gurdas refers to the Sikh scripture as *bāṇī* ("speech" or "words") and *shabad* ("word"): *bāṇī* is the material form, and *shabad* is the deeper experience that one can obtain by becoming engrossed in that form.<sup>32</sup> Kartar descends in the congregation for the enjoyment of His devotees, and can be accessed via the word (v29.19-21). The divine nature is mysterious and ineffable, and the only way to experience it is through the holy word (v9.13).

**Kartar and Guru revealed.** Singing the Guru's *bāṇī* reveals divine knowledge, keeps one from erring in deed, and delivers spiritual achievement (v3.7). The holy word transports us to the divine court, where our minds are washed clean and our pride is burned. Singing the word in the congregation, we

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<sup>31</sup> This is stated in k517; see also k505, 518, 544-5.

<sup>32</sup> See k590. Also, *pothī* is the book that contains *bāṇī*, *updes* is the Guru's words or teachings as well.

find liberation (v3.8). Like a husk to rice, the Guru's teachings are the protective element that keeps the Sikh free from sin, allowing him to remain detached while living a householder's life. Even by renouncing society for ascetic life in the forest, one cannot find the sure liberation that the word decrees (k121).

Gurdas insists that the practitioner must interact with the word in order to experience its effects, and here we examine those effects. The experience is likened to a rainstorm that waters trees with nectar. The body of the pious one is able, through the word, to help others and reform the world:

Just like: suddenly, a cloud manifests,  
and a collection of clouds spreads in the sky  
From that, the sound of the word thunders loudly,  
and the ephemeral lightning creates a splendid sight  
From the rain of immortal nectar come pearls and camphor,  
from it, many varieties of medicines are acquired  
The holy one's body becomes divine, and beyond birth-and-death  
in this world, he is manifest for the help of others (k325)

Divine light is hidden inside each of our bodies, and the Guru's teachings help unveil the spark (k363). An ant's speed verses a bird's; an ox-cart or a horse; traveling on-foot versus traveling in-mind: Gurdas makes the case that the Guru's knowledge is much more efficient than any other (k404).

The deep experience of the word is noetic. The Guru imparts the totality of ineffable knowledge: the word contains all mysteries (k430). The Guru's teachings bring about knowledge of the Most Transcendent, and as well impart a state of fearlessness (*anbhau pad*, v9.5). Drinking from love's cup, in the form of performing kirtan, helps us stay engrossed in the word, transforming us to

benevolent beings (v6.14).

The deeper meaning manifest in the holy word is revealed by extreme effort coupled with effortless grace. The Guru's Sikh is to actively seek immersion in the word, quoting from it more than speaking (v4.17). Engrossed in hearing the word, Gurdas tells the practitioner, lose yourself; you will thus get through difficult days. Be like the grass: others may trample over you, but worry only about the holy word (v9.22). Or be like the poppy seed: it is crushed in a press, mixed with water and poured in a cup. It sacrifices itself for the sake of others' drunkenness (v25.16). Hearing the continuous, blissful tune of the divine word, we are intoxicated (k284). Actively engage the word: write it, read it, sing it. It takes great effort, but only the rare one is delivered and drunk (k530). We can attain a state of seeing Kartar in all by repeatedly churning the holy word, like milk to butter (k535). Literal meaning, contemplation, and focus are obliterated when one tastes the word's deeper meaning by distilling love's liquor (k531).

Audience with each of the Gurus is available in the holy word.<sup>33</sup> The Guru is in the word, and the word is in the Guru, like a tree and seed, manifest and unmanifest (k534, k608). Gurdas elevates the true Guru to the form of Primal Being, we know the Guru through his teachings, which deliver us to the far shore of liberation (v3.1). Without the word, the human is just another animal (k202).

**Word as marker.** If the true Guru is the true emperor, and his throne sits in the saints' society, then the holy word, in the form of the Guru's scripture, is the

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<sup>33</sup> See v39.12, v39.17, k50-1.

holy mint of the Sikh spiritual empire. It combines eight elements, and touching them with the touchstone, turns them to gold. The foundations of such an empire are unshakeable (v18.20). Sikhs are praise-singing minstrels (*dhāḍī*), who chant the Guru's word in this court of true justice. The word is the community's standard (*nisān*, v3.3).

How one responds to the Guru's word marks one's position in the community: fools come to the saints' assembly, hear the Guru's word, but do not love it. Thus, they are cast as outsiders (v17.6). These insincere friends, unaffected by the Guru's teachings, will find no place in the divine court hereafter (v17.8). However, true Sikhs are attached to the word and reap its rewards:

Just as a diamond seems slight in hand  
but, when valued, its glittering can fill coffers  
Just as a cheque does not weigh much  
but returns loads of wealth when cashed  
Just as a seed's apparent form is most subtle  
but yields a massive, expansive tree  
So do the Sikhs delight with the Guru's word  
when they are known as holy men in Hari's house! <sup>34</sup>

In these comparisons with jewels, currency, and seed, Gurdas argues that there is a symbolic or transcendent value to the word that is not available in its apparent form, but which requires active engagement and exclusive commitment in order to be redeemed.

The Guru's word is in the same category as the other religious texts, but

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<sup>34</sup> See k373. Hari is an epithet for Kartar.

surpasses them: Smritis, Vedas, epics, the Gita, the Bhagavad, etc.<sup>35</sup> Gurdas defiantly claims the uniqueness of the Sikh tradition: the perfect, true Guru gave the community the perfect formula (*mantar*), and his divine words. One-half of a word from the Guru surpasses the existing scriptures (k540). Hearing the Guru's word is more efficacious than a million readings of the Hindu scriptures (v3.10). The Perfect Being is the source of revelation; He meditates on Himself, and reveals His mystery to the pious (k54). Gurdas hints that the writings of rivals were a cause of concern for his sectarian group, but adds that true Sikhs distinguish the true Guru's word from spurious writings.<sup>36</sup> The Guru's words are priceless gems and immersion in the Guru's knowledge yields the perfect treasure, which is more than what the ascetic traditions offer (k61). All other religious paths desire what the Gurmukh Panth has, and all other forms of philosophy are subordinate to it. The holy river Ganga seeks the Guru's feet; Brahma—revealer of Vedas—desires the Sikh *shabad* (k58, see also k72).

**Word as heritage.** The tradition of the word is long, deep, and has great meaning for the Sikhs. Gurdas depicts Guru Nanak as laying down the basics of Sikh practices at the town in which he lived and taught, Kartarpur. Guru Nanak said, according to Gurdas, that speaking his words illuminates life's darkness. Discussing the Guru's teachings effects the "sounding of the unstruck sound," a

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<sup>35</sup> Typically, Gurdas uses the term *bed* to refer to the Indic scriptures, and *kateb* to refer to the Semitic ones. He never refers to the Qur'an more specifically than that.

<sup>36</sup> The term used is *ān bāṇi* (k570). See also Gurdas's mention of *giān gosht* in k254.

characteristic reference to the experience of *shabad*. The three daily prayers were set in the founder's own lifetime (v1.38).

The Guru's *bāṇī* was a core aspect of the Sikh educational heritage, as each Sikh was appointed to read, understand, and teach the word (v1.3). Teaching others one word from the *bāṇī* was as meritorious as bestowing one hundred gold temples (k673). Copying manuscripts is an important service that leads to liberation (k91). Gurdas depicts goings-on in the congregation: one person writes, and another reads and explains; one person performs music, and another listens and explains it. Like jewelers appraising a diamond, Sikhs come together to tell the "untold tale," the secret discourse revealed to the Guru's Sikhs (k275).

The *amrit vela*, the ambrosial hour of the early morning, has special importance as it allows peace for deep reflection at the start of each day. The *shabad* is beyond description, and the object of enthusiastic references, reciting it the pious enjoy the "fruit of peace" early in the morning (v16.20). Whosoever enjoys the communion (*prasād*) of the word at this time will attain liberation (k361). Gurdas implores his fellow Sikhs to learn the divine word, hear it, understand it, copy it, and quote it (v28.5). All of these are important parts of "meditation" on the word, but most important of all are to speak of it, and walk its path (v28.6). Embedded in this practice is the very important belief that individual Sikhs and congregations may be spread out over great geographical distances, but can commune in the early morning hour by participating in the recitation of the

liturgy.<sup>37</sup>

### **The Saints' Society (*sādh sangat*)**

Even though Kartar and Guru rank higher in the hierarchy of holy entities, Gurdas's core concerns are with the community, as evidenced by the disproportionate amount of writing he dedicates to it. More than a commentator on the scriptural revelation, he reads like an interpreter of communal growth. *Sangat* is the most important concept in Gurdas's ideology; it is the central institution in Sikh life. Gurdas writes, that without the congregation, human life is worthless: at the least animals produce things that are useful (milk for yogurt and butter, feces and urine to be worshipped by the Hindus, v14.11). He implores his fellow Sikhs to arrive in the congregation: if they go for even one-sixtieth of their days (one *gharī*, a unit of time), they will find deliverance (*nijh ghar*, k310).

**Guru-Disciple.**<sup>38</sup> Just as Gurdas establishes equivalence with Guru and revealed word, the Sikh and Guru share a special relationship as well. The Sikh congregations, and the community as a whole, share in the Guru's holy nature. Consecutive stanzas in Vār 3 depict the word and entire community as sharing the qualities of the Guru: they are pure, unpolluted, and unique (v3.4-5). The true Guru has made his place in the saints' society; he has made his throne there and made people salute it (*salām karāiā*, v20.9). The Guru is fully present in the saints'

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<sup>37</sup> This is also true of the sunset (*rahirās*) and late night (*sohilā*) prayers.

<sup>38</sup> *Pīr-murīd* (terms from Sufi vocabulary) or *guru-chelā* (terms from Indian religions).

society; the two are like warp and woof (k195).

This special relationship between Guru and congregation stems from the lineage of Sikh Gurus sharing one essence. Not only was each Guru himself once a disciple (v7.1), but also there is equivalence between each Sikh and the Guru, and certainly between a group of Sikhs and the Guru. If the Guru shares Kartar's qualities, then so does the congregation, Gurdas writes: wherever there are two Sikhs there is the saints' society; a collectivity of five brings the presence of the Transcendent; it is thing of wonder when ten, twenty or thirty congregate.<sup>39</sup>

The relationship of the master (*pīr*) and disciple (*murīd*) is secretive, and must be experienced:

How difficult is the pīr-murīdī relationship? Rare is he who knows.  
He would be the pīr of pīrs, call him Guru of gurus  
By turning the Guru-disciple to the disciple-Guru, a wonder was  
accomplished  
He is the Guru, the same is the Sikh—light has fused into light  
There is one Guru, one Sikh; he recognizes the Guru's *shabad*  
By uniting love and mercy, love and fear are realized (v13.1)

The intimacy between the two effects a unique experience, and a wondrous equivalence: “The Guru is the disciple, the disciple is the Guru, like a diamond piercing a diamond” (v9.8, 9.9). The Sikh initiation ceremony, treated in the chapter on Sikh practices below, treats newcomers in the community on level par with the Guru (v10.9). Elsewhere, Gurdas adds, “The pious Sikh becomes the Guru, the Guru is his disciple” (v18.20). The greatness of each of the Sikhs is a point of pride for Gurdas; each Sikh is worthy of infinite praise, therefore, how

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<sup>39</sup> See k122. See also v13.18-9.



majestic must their Guru be (k73)? The Sikhs are a community of secret bearers, unified in their experience of the majesty of Sikh life (k173).

**Unity.** The congregation is one, independent social unit; just like there are trade guilds and castes, the saints' society is equivalent to one of them (v5.3-4). Grewal has registered the diversity present in Gurdas's discussion of the Sikh community, whose members belonged to various castes: peasants, priests, smiths, barbers, tailors, washermen, potters, oil men, masons, and sweepers.<sup>40</sup> Gurdas's belief system underscores this: the saints' society is special because in it, all are equal. As an extension, the entire community (Gurmukh *panth*) is one cohesive unit, irrespective of social castes, unitary like the Supreme Being (v5.9). Gurdas is proud of how Sikhs have combined the four castes into one. The Sikhs form one *jātī* ("sub-caste"), though outsiders may not accept this new reality (v11.9, v14.2). The uplifting power of the congregation replaces that of the holy Ganga river: Sikhs who come and mix in the assembly are like the liquor poured into the Ganga, which turns to pure water. The congregation is a river flowing into the Guru-sea (k88). The sweet sacrament, made up of five elements (*panchamrit*) that Sikhs enjoy after religious services is itself a metaphor for the sweetness of the congregation's caste confluence.<sup>41</sup>

Not only are the Sikhs one social unit, but a family as well. Depicting the congregation as a family would have had great implications for the casteless unity

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<sup>40</sup> Grewal, *Sikh Ideology, Polity, and Social Order*, 30-1.

<sup>41</sup> See k123-4. See also v3.16.

of the community (*chār varan ik varan hoī*), and for encouraging Sikhs to cut their ties with their non-Sikh brethren. Gurdas argues for the central role of the feet-nectar ceremony in reducing the caste distinctions and ego, making practitioners ready for life in the saints' society, and strengthening communal ties.<sup>42</sup> Sikhs find new family relations in the saints' society.<sup>43</sup> The Sikh family celebrates the Guru's holy days together (v20.7). At these events, multiple generations of Sikhs come together (*dāde pote*, v29.5). The Guru is the father of all Sikhs, and loves them all like a parent (k101-3).

**Divinity.** Not only is the congregation an extension of the Guru, but the congregation exists in the divine reality as well (v9.1). Gurdas makes no qualms about equating God with Sikh society: Kartar and Guru are immersed in the congregation, which is the “realm of Truth” (*sachkhand*), about which Guru Nanak wrote (k125). The presence of the congregation in the divine realm is one of Guru Nanak's own special gifts to the community (v6.1). Kartar is Himself the mirror and Himself the viewer, omni-present, but especially so in the saints' society. As such the community's members share a special, mysterious knowledge of the divine (v2.1). Service in the congregation is the path to reaching the divine.<sup>44</sup> Kartar addresses Narad Muni (an important figure in Vaishnava lore and practice)

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<sup>42</sup> See v16.21. See also v16.18. This ceremony is described in depth in the chapter on Sikh practices.

<sup>43</sup> See v5.2, v6.2, v6.5.

<sup>44</sup> See k143, k656, v20.10.

about His divine presence in the sangat:

O Sage Narad, the saints' society is my own abode  
Audience with the saints' society reveals my own form  
The saints' society is my mother, father, family, and friends  
The saints' society is my peerless, most noble son  
The saints' society is the source of all life's treasures and energies  
The saints' society is the place to worship and the way to  
liberation  
The saints' society enjoys love's liquor, elation and ease  
The saints' society's eminence is beyond comparison (k303)

God is most present in the Sikh congregation, which has the supreme privilege of dictating its will to God (k302). Gurdas exclaims his wonder at the following truth: the saints' society is eternal, like a tree and its fruits, and is the Realm of Truth (v39.13). Through the congregation, the Sikh tradition has resolved the tensions of all the other religious traditions:

The Formless One has come to earth in the form of "Guru"  
He has combined the four castes into the Sikhs, and made the saints'  
society into the Realm of Truth  
He is beyond the holy books: the untellable story was told through the  
Guru-word  
He is present in twenty, he made Gurmukh reach twenty-one <sup>45</sup>  
He made him an ascetic amidst the illusory world, he held him fast to  
the core of: *nām dān isnān* <sup>46</sup>  
He combined the twelve ascetic orders, and initiated the Gurmukh's  
straight path  
They climbed the stairs of honor (*pat paurī charke*) and came home (*nij  
ghar āiā*, v18.14)

Thus, the community is a central part of the divine plan, revealed in history.

**Community.** The community, which Gurdas calls the Gurmukh *Mārag* or

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<sup>45</sup> The references to "twenty" and "twenty-one," are rooted in land-surveying terminology and, as metaphors, denote this world and the next, respectively.

<sup>46</sup> Meditation, charity, and purity.

Gurmukh *Panth* (v9.3) is unified in reverence for a particular lineage of divinely inspired leaders and an evolving scriptural canon. For Gurdas, there is no difference between *sangat* (congregation) and *panth* (community). Not only are individual congregations smaller units of the larger, singular community, but also each congregation participates in Kartar's own revelation in human history.

In parts of his writing, Gurdas uses the word "Gurmukh" for persons who would have lived before the Sikh period, as a testament to continuity of Kartar's unfolding plan. For example, the Rig Veda addressed Gurmukhs in its time (v1.9), and in the pre-Nanak era, Gurmukhs stayed away from pilgrimage places (v1.26). In the Dark Age, the Gurmukh is revealed because of Guru Nanak's efforts (v1.27). In Vār 10, concerned with the mythologies of pre-Sikh mythological and saintly figures, the word Gurmukh is used in reference to the lives of Raja Janak, Bhagat Beni, and Kabir.<sup>47</sup>

The difference between previous ages and this one, however, is that Nanak has forged the Community of Gurmukhs, which is the true *Panth* (v26.1). Human birth is fortunate, and the highest form of life is that of the Gurmukh. Without being a Gurmukh, life is a waste (v15.3). Being a Gurmukh is better than achieving liberation (k154).

A deep confidence about the Gurmukh *Panth* dominates Gurdas's language. We ought to see this overwhelmingly positive attitude about community success in

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<sup>47</sup> See specifically v10.5, 10.14, 10.15. The relative prominence of the pre-Sikh saints and the Guru's Sikhs will be more specifically addressed in the chapter on Sikh ascendance.

light of the extremely difficult times his sectarian group was undergoing at the time of his writing. He tells the Sikhs not to lose faith in these trying times. He tells them to focus on their mind, words, and actions and then when these three are in unison, anything is possible. The true Guru's house is altruistic, but successful in worldly matters: food, clothes, and tax (*zakāt*) come raining over us (k629).

Blessed are the community's institutions: the Guru, Sikh, and the Primal Being.

Blessed are the Guru's audience, his word, and his lotus feet. Blessed are his teachings and the Sikhs who bear the unbearable (v12.19).

Gurdas boasts a certain prestige to belonging to the Sikh community; the Sikhs have supplanted the other traditions and risen to the top of the hierarchy of religions. Gurdas asks: would the son of the king of the forest be subservient to a jackal? Would the son of an eagle salute a crow? According to Gurdas, if the son of a Sikh becomes a worshipper of another god, his life is a waste and he is a bastard (k477).

## Conclusion

It seems Gurdas had good reason to feel confident. Scholars are clear on the success of the Sikh community during Gurdas's lifetime, especially during the reign of Mughal Emperor Akbar (1556-1605).<sup>48</sup> Most compelling is Guru Arjan's

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<sup>48</sup> According to Grewal, the early 1600s Sikh community was spread out across North India, and quite prosperous. It looked from the outside like a state within the larger Mughal state, and from the inside like "a parallel dispensation" to the Mughals'. (Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*, 42. J. S. Grewal, *A Study of Guru Granth Sahib: Doctrine, Social Content, History, Structure and Status* (Amritsar: Singh Brothers, 2009), 156.) Pashaura Singh adds that Guru Arjan's city of Amritsar, or

own testimony: he speak's of the material success of the Guru's unshakeable town (*abichal nagarī*), his own rule (*halemī rāj*), his own army, and high walls of his own houses.<sup>49</sup> From history we know this town was an important place of trade, and Sikhs here and across North India experienced great material success. At the center of the town sat the Guru's physical court, the central place of worship known today as the Darbar Sahib; its architecture and structure itself evidence of authority and success. This success, however, also made the community vulnerable to rivals and visible to the ire of the state, especially after Akbar's death in 1605. Guru Arjan's 1606 execution is evidence for this, and Gurdas's exuberance in the community's future after the Guru's death is a testament to the community's own intention to continue its growth and success, and its quiet defiance of repression.<sup>50</sup>

**Gurdas's core beliefs.** Kartar, Creator and Master of this world and the entire universe, is ultimately unknowable—with one exception. Understanding of Kartar and His ways is available in the holy congregation, the society of saints. Nanak is its Guru, Kartar's own extension, His own messenger, and world reformer. Guru Nanak forged a community of pious ones, the Gurmukhs who bear a secret knowledge of Kartar, which they have gained by their own experiences. Guru Nanak has revealed teachings about Kartar and how to live according to His

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Ramdaspur, was an important town: "The administration of [Ramdaspur] was evidently in the hands of Guru Arjan, and in a certain sense Ramdaspur was an autonomous town in the context and framework of the Mughal rule of Emperor Akbar". (Singh, *Life and Work of Guru Arjan*, 34.)

<sup>49</sup> GG 74, 430, 622, 1141.

<sup>50</sup> This defiance is taken up in greater detail in Chapter Six.

ways that are enshrined in the scripture his community reveres.

The Guru is the Primal Spirit of the all-pervading Lord, accessible to all but most present in Guru Nanak and his successors. The Guru is Kartar's path-showing light. Nanak was Kartar's instrument in self-revelation and his scripture is Kartar's manifest form. Nanak's actions in the world are acts for its redemption, and examples of Kartar's revelation as well. Nanak established a succession of teachers, on par with himself, who continue Kartar's revelation, through word and action, in history.

The presence of the all-powerful Creator Being exists in the bond between members of the Sikh congregation. The Guru is Kartar's manifest form and the Guru's word is His aural form. Kartar is available and present in the kirtan, and His functionaries stand and obey the congregation's orders when it is immersed in kirtan. The congregation is Kartar's abode. Wherever the Sikhs go, Kartar watches over them. Some of this can be described, but the reality of it is beyond description, can only be experienced and lived. Only those who participate in the community understand this true aspect of divinity, and only they understand the true nature of the Guru.

According to Gurdas, *bāṇī* makes the Vedas obsolete, surpasses the writings of the Jogis, and is the divine revelation for the Sikhs as the Qur'an is for the Muslims.<sup>51</sup> It has a secret inner meaning that can only be known to the one who hears it, sings it, writes it, and enacts it in his or her life. In interacting with the

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<sup>51</sup> Although the Qur'an is not mentioned specifically, it is implied in the term *kateb*, referring to the Semitic scriptures.

*bāṇī* in the saints' society one is closer to the Guru and can feel the Guru's presence. The revealed word is the community's rallying point, its rallying standard, and the source of its uniqueness. The Guru is absolutely necessary for knowledge of Kartar, and through his knowledge, liberation from the oppressive cycles of worldly existence. This knowledge, and related to this, audience with the Guru himself, is available through the holy word. How a practitioner responds to the Guru's word marks his or her position within the community. Most importantly, the practitioner reveres the Sikh Guru's word, to the exclusion of all other religions' teachings. Moreover, she takes the apparent content of the word (*bāṇī*) and interacts with it in order to access its deeper, mystical content (*shabad*), which is in the tune with Kartar's own reality. The practices of the community associated with this interaction, bring about a deep, unshakeable faith in the practitioner. This faith strengthens his or her attachment to the Guru, and his community, providing a source of self-sacrifice on their behalf.

The Gurmukh Panth continues that revelation, as it is an extension of the Guru's essence, which is mystically present in its collectivity. The chief means for the pouring out of the Guru's holy nature into the collectivity of his worshippers is through reverence for, performance of, and accordance with the holy word. Sangat is the location where one can begin the fight against darkness of the world, a place to worship and to be worshipped, and a refuge where one can meet like-minded individuals, where one's place in society does not matter. The Guru's presence is available here, even if the Guru's body is not present. The congregation possesses



many of the qualities of the Guru: its actions are ethical, beautiful and righteous; thereby its renown is widespread like the fragrance of the sandal tree.

The congregation is a self-sustaining system, serving the larger world because it is an extension of the Guru's mission. Sikhs are constantly helping others, and in helping others they are reforming the world. The sangat makes it unnecessary to pursue pilgrimage and other religious practices because the performance of sustaining acts for the congregation is the most meritorious: tending to the fire, bringing water to worshippers, fanning them, cooking, cleaning, advancing Sikh tradition by teaching Sikhs how to read, copying the words of Sikh scripture so that the tradition may spread and others can understand the divine word. Sikh community invites outsiders to participate in it through interacting with the scriptural revelation and supporting the community, which is part of the continual revelation of God to reform the world through righteous acts. Spreading the community is the most important way to participate in that revelation.

**A community of believers.** To know Gurdas's beliefs is to know 1600s orthodox Sikh self-conception. Through Gurdas, we see how Sikhs considered their non-Sikh neighbors, and built their boundaries relative to the other communities around them. Unified in their strict, anti-iconic monotheism, Sikhs set themselves in distinction to ideologies of incarnation, be they Vaishnava, Shakta, Shaiva, or otherwise. This monotheism did not set them within the Muslim fold, however. They held no specific reverence for the Abrahamic prophecies, though they did respect other religions as divinely inspired. For Guras, only the

most pious of the previous saints and messengers of lore equaled the status of the Sikhs of Guru Nanak's community. Sikhs' sense of belonging, what keeps them together, and what ultimately defines each of them as Sikhs are derived from actions, practices, and their enactment of specific ethical codes, considered in the next chapter.

The practitioner's willingness for self-surrender on the community's behalf is a point of pride for Gurdas. Sikhs place no faith in the promises of other religions. For Gurdas, they are uniquely and exclusively allegiant with the community of Gurmukhs, initiated by Nanak and led by his successors. The community has supplanted other traditions and risen to the top of the hierarchy of paths to Kartar. Through their revealed word, their adherents form a congregation and community that share in their Gurus' holy nature. This community is eternal, growing and spreading like trees and fruits. It is a central part of the divine plan, part of Kartar's revelation in history.

## Chapter Four

### Walking the Straight Path: Early Sikh Ethics

Contemplating the word brings a benevolent attitude  
Destroying self-pride brings austerity's fruits  
The one who has heard the word is liberated-in-life  
Right conduct brings true peace  
— Guru Nanak (GG 1343)

#### Ethics and Sikh Community

In this dissertation, when I refer to Gurdas's ethics, I mean those parts of his corpus dedicated to proper conduct for Sikh religious practitioners. Broadly speaking, the term *rahit* also connotes the idea of conduct-oriented injunctions. *Rahit* is a term that, today, is associated with the Sikh tradition from the eighteenth century onwards.<sup>1</sup>

Close readings of Gurdas's works, however, significantly challenge this understanding of Sikh self-perception in the early seventeenth century, and show that *rahit* was part and parcel of Gurdas's discussion of the good life. For one, we

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<sup>1</sup> According to McLeod, Gurdas' statements about *rahit* (conduct) inform us about seventeenth century Sikh norms "more in terms of general principal than specific precept". Though they echo the Guru's writings and offer normative doctrinal positions about the *rahit*, they lack the injunctions and prohibitions of the later codes of conduct, are not concerned with markers of community membership, and thus ought to be relegated to the status of "proto-*rahit*". McLeod uses these premises to underscore his thesis of the late development of a fixed Sikh identity in the eighteenth and, especially, nineteenth centuries. See W. H. McLeod, *Exploring Sikhism : Aspects of Sikh Identity, Culture and Thought* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 107. See also McLeod, *Sikhs of the Khalsa: A History of the Khalsa Rahit*, 3.

see that Gurdas is quite concerned with the importance of ethical living, and very specific in his injunctions. Gurdas's works are important sources for Sikh conduct and ethics before the eighteenth century *rahitnāmās* (codes of conduct), and provide the foundation on which the later texts were built. Second, we will expand our notion of what Gurdas's *rahit* entails. Gurdas's discussions of *rahit* are (a) interspersed in fragments throughout his works, and (b) concentrated in major conduct-oriented sections in very specific locations throughout the texts. His ethical injunctions are specific and general, prescriptive and proscriptive, negative and positive. We will consider them all. Third, we will show that Gurdas's ethical injunctions require exclusive allegiance from Sikh practitioners to the rightful Guru, and define membership in the community according to this clear line that he draws. Fourth, this chapter culminates in a description of the Gurmukh, Gurdas's ideal, pious Sikh. In the chapter's concluding section, we will consider Sikh communal self-perception in Gurdas's period and how it changed in the decades after his life.

A close reading for *rahit* in Gurdas's works reveals a deep concern with ethical living in the seventeenth century Sikh tradition. In the *kabitts*, Gurdas states that only the Sikh who takes in the Guru's word, and lives by it (*rahat rahiṇī*) is true, all others are insincere (*kapaṭ sanehī*, k440). Elsewhere, Gurdas states that in order to reap the full benefits of the divine revelation, one must enact it and live within the confines of the conduct it prescribes. Those who achieve this discipline

(*rahat rahande*) are like the lotus above the pond water, and those who do not enact this kind of discipline are like frogs in the muck (v17.2). Thus, for Gurdas, *rahit*, the conduct and ethics by which a Sikh lives, demarcate one's commitment to the tradition. Gurdas's writings provide early examples of Sikh conduct codes, adherence to the ideals of which mold its practitioners into a singular, exclusive religious community.

## **Roots**

Gurdas argues that Sikhs get their ethical drive from their founder. Guru Nanak taught that caste-less living, humility, and hard physical labor had to be accomplished before spiritual achievement was possible (v1.25). Gurdas not only depicts Guru Nanak as divinely blessed, but a man on an arduous mission rooted in the ethical imperative to help a suffering world (v.1.24). Nanak's simple ethical message is so powerful that he uses it to shame even the world-renouncing Nath Jogis at their mythical home on Mount Meru (v1.29). When religious lawgivers ask Guru Nanak to flip through his book to tell them what it says about the relative virtues of the religions, the Guru replies that without right conduct both Hindus and Muslims suffer (*bābā ākhe 'hājiā, shubi amalān bājhahu dono roī'*, v1.33). In this key ethical statement, Gurdas places hopes for religious reconciliation in ethical living. Guru Hargobind, questioned by curious Sikhs about the future of the

Guruship, provides a reply that shows the heavy ethical responsibilities he bears to be the world's Guru, and this is the source of his divinely legitimated rule (v1.47-8).

Thus, the community's ethical imperative comes from the burdens its founders bore, and ethical living is the hallmark of communal membership. All religions proclaim that they have the truth, but more important than truth, Gurdas says, is conduct (*āchār*, v18.19). Disputations of knowledge (*giān gosht*) do not lead to liberation; ethical living is the chief mode for that (*karnī pradhān*, k437). Compared with the many practices of the many religions, truth is the highest form of religiosity. But higher above even that is the true conduct of the Gurmukhs (*Gurmukhi sachu āchārā*, v39.6). Pious Sikhs see the world with a special clarity because they reside in it like guests in a house: they remember their duties with every breath, no matter where they are (19.7). In describing the practices in which Sikhs engage, Gurdas says that the hands of the pious are hardened by doing the Guru's works in the congregation, which allows them to erase their obstructive egos (v6.12). Piety and impiety are not revealed by physical characteristics or caste; actions alone expose true virtue (v35.17). Gurdas is so deeply positive about ethics that he sees the "Dark Age" of Hindu cosmology as a fundamentally just period when every individual is responsible for his or her own actions. The best actions, of course, are those associated with the Sikh community: treating others with love and devotion (*bhau bhagatī*), celebrating *gurpurabs*, and worshipping in the

dharamsāl (“house of worship,” v26.7). In the kabitts, Gurdas introduces the theme of *gurmat sat kar*, enacting the teachings of the Guru (k24-27). Gurdas postulates *karnī* (doing, action, or ethics) as the third part of the acquisition of the “nectar of love” (*prem ras*, k43, 45). This is like the importance Gurdas gives to knowledge, meditation and ethical action (*man bach karam*) elsewhere, from which the feeling of love springs up.

## Forms

**Ethics here and there.** Gurdas’s ethical statements come in a variety of forms. Most commonly, information about how Sikhs should conduct themselves appear in a line or two in a broader stanza about a non-ethical subject. That is to say, Gurdas is always dropping hints for Sikhs in bits and pieces. He repeatedly includes single, pithy verses about the virtue of humility. The Guru loves he who walks humbly (v4.5). Ego is the biggest cause for distance from the divine (v1.11.3). Do good and consider yourself lowly: this is the way to the divine’s good graces (v1.16.7). Speak sweet words and eschew your ego (v3.13.3). This life is precious, do not waste a moment. Do kirtan in the Sangat, with music and instruments. Hear the tune of the word and sing it (k500). The Guru’s Sikh wakes up and meditates in the early morning, tastes the nectar and enjoys it (k568). Sleep little, eat little: this is the path to earning merit from the word (k569). The

Gurmukh redeems his human birth by reading, understanding, and communicating the meaning of *bāṇī* to his loved ones (v1.3.5). The Gurmukh does not follow any other deities, demons, or demigods and is not afraid of death (v5.6). The oneness of Kartar parallels the lack of social divisions in the holy congregation: the Gurmukh Panth loses its sense of binaries by focusing on the oneness of the Supreme Being (v5.9).

In small, pithy sayings, some of which would have been familiar to the Sikhs of the time, Gurdas captures a great deal of ethical meaning while breathing familiarity. Vār stanza 26.4 is loaded with these, many of which are borrowed from the Gurus' own hymns: loving devotion (*bhau bhagatī*), meditation, charity, and purity; being detached in the world (*māiā vich udās*); speaking sweetly, walking humbly, and giving from one's share (*miṭhā bolāṇa, niv calāṇa, hathahu dei*). The Gurmukh stays away from the wealth and bodies of others (*par tan, par dhan*, v25.2). He who looks at another's woman (*par-dārā*) with lust should seek the Guru's sight instead. Rather than slandering others (*par nindā*), speak the Guru's words. Rather than coveting another's wealth (*par darab*), sing kirtan in the holy congregation (k508). The ones without virtue engage in lust, greed, and slander.<sup>2</sup> The Gurmukh knows he is a guest in this world (*jag mahimāṇ*, v3.3). The Gurmukh understands that, living in this world, he is a guest at a party: he eats

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<sup>2</sup> The original is: *par nārī, par darab, par nindā* (v37.16).



what is fed to him, he drinks what he is given to drink (v19.3).

**Concentrated ethical stanzas.** A great number of Gurdas's ethical injunctions come in concentrated chunks of continuous poetry. The very existence of lists of conduct in Gurdas's works indicates his intention to compile concentrated codes of conduct within confined poetic spaces. This further shows that clarifying and explicating the Sikh way of life was a very significant part.

Vār Five and Six provide a series of ethical injunctions that comprise the earliest, concentrated forms of the Sikh rahit. In Vār Five Gurdas provides core ethical statements regarding absolute loyalty to the Guru, as exclusivity is the hallmark of the Sikh and distinctiveness is the hallmark of the whole Gurmukh Panth (v5.1). Gurdas promotes liturgy and congregational worship in Sikh life (v6.3). His verse resonates with a famous composition from Guru Nanak to establish that "Vahiguru" is the Guru's *mantar* (Sanskrit: *mantra*, "formula" for repetition and focus), feet-nectar is the water of purity that makes us humble, and that an ethical life leads the Gurmukh to liberation (v6.5).<sup>3</sup> Focusing on how Sikhs should worship the dust at each others' feet, Gurdas offers proscriptions against polygamy, lust, and greed, as well as against the practices of sacred threads (v6.7-8). The Gurmukhs' hands are hardened by earning good acts (and merit) in the holy congregation: they transcribe the Guru's words in volumes, play musical

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<sup>3</sup> Gurdas mimics Guru Nanak's shalok beginning *pavan guru...* (GG 8).

instruments (*tāl, mardang, rabāb*), and wash the feet of the pious. They live according to high ethical standards, work hard and give charitably (Guru Nanak's "*hathu dei*," v6.12). Gurdas says that they understand that the Gurmukh's feet are special because they walk the Guru's path: go to the Guru's house, attend congregational worship, and run to altruistic acts. He adds that upon finding other Sikhs, Gurmukhs circumambulate (*pardakhaṇā*) them (perhaps this means they bring newcomers into the fold) and do not go to any other community (v6.13). The Gurmukh should speak sweetly; see the divine and all, and in himself too; hear the shabad; do good works, and use his hands to salute; walk the path (v6.18).

The first six stanzas of the Twelfth Vār are more refined than the codes of vārs five and six, indicating that Gurdas refined his ethical injunctions as his career progressed.<sup>4</sup> Written in first person, Gurdas repeatedly offers himself as a sacrifice to the pious Sikhs who perform the following: physically go to see the Guru, fall at other Sikhs' feet and sit in religious assembly, speak of the Guru's teachings, treat others Sikhs as family, serve the Guru (*abhirīṭhā*), and help others cross the ocean of life (v12.1). Gurdas holds up the ideals of waking at the end of the night, bathing in the sacred pool (referring to Amritsar's sacred tank) in the morning's early hours, performing Guru Nanak's *Jap* with focused mind, attending congregational worship, singing kirtan, and celebrating the Guru's holy days with one's brothers-in-Guru

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<sup>4</sup> For a translation of these, see: McLeod, *Sikhs of the Khalsa: A History of the Khalsa Rahit*, McLeod, *Sikhs of the Khalsa: A History of the Khalsa Rahit*, 261-63.

(v12.2). Other than proscribing adultery, polygamy, coveting, and slander, the remaining four stanzas offer less concrete advice about how to live, and focus more on the attitude a Sikh should maintain: consider yourself meek though you may be mighty; be wise but proceed with a child's innocence; perform benevolent acts (*parupkārī*); keep one's heart at the Guru's feet and the Guru's teachings in one's mind (v12.3-6).

Some of the later vars also discuss the ideal Sikh's life:

Waking at night's end, hold steadfast to *nām dān isnān*  
Speak sweetly, tread softly, give from your hands, give thanks  
Sleep little, eat little, speak little, and receive the Guru's teachings  
Eat of your labor, perform good deeds, be great but remain unnamed  
Day and night, congregate with the holy, sing  
Acquaint yourself with the sound of the word, thus know the true Guru  
and satisfy your heart  
Amidst temptation, remain untempted (v28.15).

Vār 29 articulates three major precepts: sweet speech (*mithā bolan*), humility (*niv calaṇu*), and giving from one's share (*hathu de*, v29.4). The Guru's Sikhs are Jogis, they keep spiritual restraints while living in *māiā*; their earrings are the Guru's *mantar*, the saints' dust is their staff; forgiveness is their blanket and love is their source of sustenance; the holy congregation is the cave in which they meditate (v29.11-5). The first three stanzas of Vār 32 underscore the Sikh ideals: innocence, love, discipleship, learning, acceptance, understanding of the Guru's teachings, worshipping of other Sikhs, and hard work (v32.1-3). One of the final stanzas of the vārs also underscores the ethical precepts that are outlined throughout, offering

a pithy conclusion. Sikh ethical living is identified with the highway path (*gāḍḍī rāh*) established by the founder himself.

Waking at the ambrosial hour, the Guru's Sikh bathes at the tank  
Repeating the Guru's words, he arrives at the dharamsāl  
Arriving at the holy congregation, he listens lovingly to the holy word  
Dispelling doubts from his heart, he serves the Guru's Sikhs  
Earning from his hard work, he takes sacrament and distributes it  
Serving the Guru's Sikhs, he eats from what's left  
Lighting the way in this Dark Age, the Guru is the disciple, and the  
disciple meets the Guru  
Gurmukhs travel the straight path (v40.11)

The second kind of litany of ethical norms are less explicit and less specific, but nonetheless were meant to guide Sikhs and inspire normative action. These are stanza containing “oughts”: how ought a Gurmukh carry himself? Gurdas's guidance to the Sikh answers the questions, “what do we do?” and “how ought we live?” For example, at the end of his vār expounding the virtue of steadfast suffering, Gurdas offers his advice about how to practice the religion:

O! Hear how to be a Guru's Sikh: inside wise, outside a novice  
Alert, immersed in the word, he is mute  
He takes audience with the True Guru, away from the congregation is  
blind and homeless  
He takes the Guru's word, Vahiguru, quietly quaffing from the cup of  
love  
Falling at feet, he becomes dust, washes feet, and drinks feet-nectar  
Like a bumble bee around lotus feet, he is distinct from the water of the  
world  
His mortal frame and life are saved (*jīvan mukat*, v4.17)

Gurdas attempts to inspire his fellow Sikhs to a state of deep ethical concern: we ought wash our reputation at the Guru's court, and burn our ego there; fetching

water and grinding grain, we ought to toil in service (v3.8). We ought to be subservient, meet our brothers lovingly, serve, and recite the prayers daily (v3.9). Gurdas inspires Sikhs to give themselves over in discipleship like martyrs (*shahīd*, v3.18). We divorce ourselves from the ten senses and aim for a state humble acceptance of the divine will (v3.19-20). Sikhs are to act as if they are guests in someone's house, and walk according to the divine will (*hukam razāi chalaṇā*, v9.3). In this way, the Gurmukh Panth continues its ways established by the founder (v9.14). Accepting the divine plan is repeated often, and in Vār 18 it is linked with fulfilling one's faith, which water cannot drown and fire cannot burn (v18.21-2).

**Kabitts.** Gurdas's kabitts also provide a rich resource for understanding his ethical stances: according to the Guru's teachings, the Sikh wakes up in the early hours and bathes, while his tongue recites the Guru's *mantar*. He focuses on the Guru's ideas (*gurmat*) and renounces those of others (*durmat*), and professes the Sikh Panth to be the highest of all. Seeing, hearing, and speaking well of all, he lives (*rahit*) in his internal being as the one who believes in the Guru (k613).

Many of the conduct-oriented kabitts are distinct from their counterparts in the vārs in at least three ways. One, they are concerned with directing ethical living towards the goal of sublime and liberating religious experiences. For example, one declares that only by enacting the Guru's word can we obtain the highest state

(*parampad*), while another promises a wondrous experience (*bismai bisam, adbhut parmadbhut*) to the practitioner who enacts the Guru's ideas (*satguru mat*, k439 and k138). Second, the kabitts express a heightened concern for caste equality in the holy congregation, and implore the reader to see all members of the community as equals. The Sikhs who would have lived in the predominantly Braj-speaking areas would have been members of the trading classes, and there is evidence from Sikh history that they saw themselves as superior to the rustic classes of the agrarian Sikh homeland.<sup>5</sup> Finally, the kabitts are uniquely concerned with proscribing Hindu polytheism, particularly Vaishnava worship.

I will briefly summarize three sets of ethically oriented kabitts, those numbered in the 130s to 140s, 380s to 390s, and 430s to 490s. In the first batch, Gurdas implores his co-religionists to see the transcendent Lord in all, enact divine love, and speak sweet words. In the Sikh congregation kirtan and discussion brings the four castes into one, and in this oneness the practitioner achieves a state of focus where his mind does not wander elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> In the second batch, Gurdas tells us that high and low status are not socially determined, but like righteousness, revealed according to one's actions. The Guru's pious Sikhs put wealth to use for

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<sup>5</sup> For one example, see the dialogue between a Jatt and Khatri from the Dabistan mentioned in the previous chapter: J. S. Grewal and Irfan Habib, *Sikh History from Persian Sources : Translations of Major Texts* (New Delhi: Tulika, 2001), 78. For more on the social divisions in Sikh society, please see: Mann, *Sikhism*, 94-99.

<sup>6</sup> See k137, 138, 144, 145.

benevolent acts (*parupkārī*), but in the hands of the impious (*asādhs*), it amounts to no good. Beware of the impious one when he comes to the congregation, where he is like a crow sitting amongst an assembly of Mansarovar's swans. Befriending or villainizing such dangerous people results in detriment.<sup>7</sup> In the third set of kabitts considered here Gurdas follows a statement about the primacy of conduct (*karnī pradhān*) with a set of polemics against the worshippers of many gods (*dev sevak*). On the one hand Gurdas promises the Guru's compassion to the one who has returned to the community from the worship of others, but elsewhere calls for the immediate removal of the polytheists from Sikh congregation. Not only does Gurdas expect exclusive religious allegiance, he likens worshipping another god to adultery.<sup>8</sup>

## Content

**The Gurmukh way.** The ideal of the Gurmukh is itself a discursive technique to clarify Sikh identity via writings about conduct. The Gurmukh's defining characteristic is his undying, exclusive allegiance to the Guru and the Panth. For Gurdas, the Gurmukh is the committed one, literally the one who only turns to the Guru. The Gurmukh is committed in spite of all difficulties, suffers and attains

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<sup>7</sup> See k382, 384-6, 388, 390.

<sup>8</sup> The word is *vibhchārī*. See k439, k441-2, k444, k452, k490.

the highest state, remains committed (through the drinking of feet nectar, *apīou pī*) and bears the unbearable without shirking (*ajar jar*). The Gurmukh's life is fruitful and leads to liberation, he finds a new family in the holy congregation (v6.5). Along with fetching water, grinding wheat, and stoking wood in the kitchen, taking care of the poor, singing the *bāñī*, feeding charity, washing feet, and feeding the Gurmukhs are meritorious acts (v14.18-20).

**Householding.** At the core of the Gurmukh community's ethics are strong proscriptions against the coveting of others' bodies and wealth (v25.2). The Gurmukh's entire body is involved in his religiosity, but he must put it to discipline. He ought to speak sweetly, and do what seems right to him; see the divine and all, and see himself too; hear the *shabad*; use his hands to do good works, and to salute others; and walk the path with his feet. In this way, the Gurmukh finds liberation-in-life (*jīvan muktī*) and vices like desire do not challenge him (v6.18).

In this kind of discipline, the Gurmukh achieves all of the spiritual experiences that are typically reserved for ascetics. The Gurmukh is detached amidst the illusions of the ephemeral world (*māiā vich udāsi*, v26.4). Householder-ship (*grahastī*) is the highest of disciplines (*dharam*, k376).

Gurdas is clearly aware of how slippery a slope the issue of desire is in a householder religious tradition, and promises the Guru's assistance for the Sikh to



stay away from chasing wealth and lust (k369). Wealth and the illusions of the ephemeral world, which are deemed adverse to spiritual pursuits, can be cultivated for the benefit of others. This ethical approach fits well in the context of early Sikh prosperity, which helped to spread Sikh institutions and towns. For the Sikhs, wealth is pure (*pavitar*) and auspicious, but in the hands of the rest of the world it burns (k384). Continuing with the last kabitt's theme: wealth, which lays waste to the rest of the world, is used for benevolence by Sikhs—just like there is no essential difference between the iron that is present in handcuffs or the one that the *pāras* (“touchstone”) turns to stone (k385).

Key to the anti-ascetical ethics is marriage. Polygamy is forbidden, monogamy is all but required. A male Sikh can have only one wife and renounces the desire for other women as a Hindu does beef, and a Muslim, pork (v6.8). Gurdas implores Sikhs to see all women as mothers and sisters, see the Lord like warp and woof in all bodies, and control their minds with the Guru's word (k547).

Gurdas assumed the patriarchal modes of his day, as men seem to be his assumed audience.<sup>9</sup> Another way to see the issue, however, is that Gurdas assumes a oneness of the sexes. There is no separate identity or rituals articulated for

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<sup>9</sup> Feminist scholars who have censured the Sikh tradition's silencing and negation of gender issues will not find much accommodation of women's liberation in Gurdas's writings. Unlike what can be said for the aims of the Sikh founder, women's empowerment does not seem to be high on Gurdas's agenda. For a treatment of Guru Nanak's opinion on women, as well as the role of women in Sikh history, please see: Mann, *Sikhism*, 102-6.

women. This points to an equality of men, women, and children in the community as the spiritual “brides” of the Guru.<sup>10</sup> The pregnant woman provides the ideal parallel for spiritual constraint: she sleeps little, and eats in moderation. This is the way to earning the benefits from the word (k569).

In the kabitts, the householder motif provides a double metaphor. For one, the disciple should live an aware life while holding a family. Second, the Sikh community is itself a family, of which the Guru is the father.<sup>11</sup> A woman’s devotion to her husband is a metaphor for the disciple’s relationship to the Guru and God. The Gurmukh is like the perfect woman (v5.16).

**Exclusive allegiance.** As in monogamy, where husband and wife practice mutual and singular devotion, the Sikh is to be uniquely devoted to his Guru. When Guru Arjan’s execution opened the door to schism along previous intra-communal fault lines, Gurdas used the concept of the Gurmukh to define the ideal of Sikh conduct. Gurdas’s polemics against intra- and extra-communal agents (like the *mīṇā* schismatics, and the Vaishnava believers) are juxtaposed with Gurdas’s conception of the ideal Sikh, or Gurmukh. Playing foil to the Gurmukhs are the non-Sikhs, as well as the community’s detractors, who are together generally

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<sup>10</sup> For more about the principle of femininity in early Sikh writings, please see: Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, *The Feminine Principle in the Sikh Vision of the Transcendent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> See k480, 481, 483.

designated by the term *manmukh*: “the one who follows himself”. The impious (*asādh*), the apostate (*bemukh*), and the insincere friend (*kapaṭ sanehī*) are specific examples of the *manmukh*. In this way, the Gurmukh-*manmukh* duality provides markers for Sikh identity to show “in” versus “out,” in terms of community membership.

The Gurmukh worships only in the holy congregation, and does not mix with other companies, good or bad. His pious community (Gurmukh Panth) is unique, he earns the word and does not falter from the feet-falling tradition (v5.1). The Gurmukh does not follow any other deities, demons, or demigods, and is not afraid of death (v5.6). Drinking of Sikhs’ feet nectar brings about a deep peace in the Gurmukhs, and make pilgrimage to the religious places of others unnecessary (v.23.2). Hindu pilgrimages are like the blind pushing the blind into a well, Gurmukhs are not seen at such places (v1.26). The Gurmukh does not just renounce the ways of other religions, but the conduct of the common people more generally (*lokāchārī*, k39-41).

The key characteristic of the *manmukh* is that he is not a Gurmukh. He is lost in the twelve paths (of Jog), drowns in the ocean of existence, dies fruitlessly, bears the fruit of pain, and burns in the fire of ego (v5.15). Like a prostitute’s many lovers, the *manmukh* visits too many places of worship, and even goes to worship in the enemy-congregation (*dushṭan-sangat*, v5.17). The *manmukh* is

caught up in the love of the other, and is suffers in that confounded state (v5.20, v15.10, v15.11). *Manmukh* is that one who follows a human guru, as opposed to the True Guru of the Sikhs (v15.4). Human birth is the highest, but it is better to be an animal or ghost than a *manmukh* (v15.3, v15.19). *Manmukh* is on the wrong path and incurs the ultimate loss (v17.4). The *manmukh* comes to the Sangat, hears the word, but does not put it in his heart, and thereby his attendance is of no soteriological benefit (v17.6). Because of his ego, the *manmukh* wanders from place to place (v5.19). The *manmukh*'s love of the other leads him to ruin, but the Gurmukh is on the Guru's high road (*gāḍḍī rāh*, v5.20). The insincere ones are impermanent in this world, like the color of maddor, but those who undergo hardship enjoy an ultimate and lasting victory (v4.6).

**A taxonomy of otherness.** Gurdas goes to great lengths to underscore the importance of exclusive allegiance to the Guru, as evidenced by the vārs' systematic taxonomy of the *manmukhs*. Vār 30 declares that the Gurmukh is on the side of truth, permanence, and beauty (v.30.5), and this begins a series of vārs marking a great divide in Gurdas's ethical norms—the clear distinction between the community and the other. Gurmukhs represent truth and *manmukhs* represent all that is false (v30.5). The *manmukh* is the bastard son of a prostitute (v30.2.7 and v.30.3.5). Whereas the Gurmukh remains anonymous, the *manmukhs* get themselves publicized (*āp gaṇāvaṇā*) as the adherent of another religious system,

moving him away from the Guru's teachings.

Gurdas's ethics of allegiance provide key markers for communal identity: the practitioner is either with us or with the agents of darkness and falsehood. Being true, Gurmukhs are distinct and impenetrable (v30.17). In the scheme of divine justice, truth will eventually triumph over falsehood (v30.6). Truth and falsehood are both litigants in the halls of justice; he who is robbed will eventually triumph, and who he robs will eventually get robbed (30.12). Like the sugar cane, it is in the nature of the good beings to suffer quietly (v30.15). But Kartar's justice is ultimately true and accurate (v31.17).

More than just a simple notion of in-and-out, Gurdas creates a taxonomy of the other by specifying the various kinds of *manmukhs*. Vār-by-vār, Gurdas begins to expound on the characteristics of the various types of *manmukhs*. There is the fool (Vār 32), the two-timer (Vār 33), the apostate (Vār 34), the slanderer (Vār 35), and, worst of all, the scoundrels who pay tribute to the rival Sikh sect (Vār 36).

The fool (*mūrakh*) is a humorous character who stands out in the community less out of his own agency than his ignorance (Vār 32). Whereas Vār 17 names *manmukhs*, insincere friends, and apostates, Vār 33 talks of two-timers (*dubājarās*). He is either a Hindu or Muslim, but he thinks he can still be part of the Sikh community. Gurdas spends twenty stanzas explaining why serving two masters is not a good idea.

As opposed to the *manmukhs* who come to the Sangat, the apostate (*bemukh*) is a special breed: he has turned his back on the Guru and his plight is taken up in Vār 34. An apostate is one who has left the Guru to worship another (v34.19). In this world, one reaps what one sows. He is unable to recognize the worth of what he is turning away from (v34.4), and like the conch who remains dry in the ocean or the plants that remain dry in the rainy season, the apostate never soaked in (v34.5). The next type to meet Gurdas's ire are those who calculate against the Guru, or have calculating intentions about the Guru's funds. Looking at the dharmasala's funds is forbidden for Sikhs as beef is for Hindus and pork for Muslims, and disastrous in its effects as eating sugar-coated poison (v35.12). Gurdas calls out the enemies of his tradition with two other names in Vār 35: the ingrate (*akritghan*) and the disloyal sinner (*lūṇ harāmī guṇāhagār*). So terrible is the ingrate's gaze that an outcaste sweeper lady shades a piece of dog meat cooked in liquor from his sight in order to protect it (35.9). Gurdas invokes the power of ultimate divine justice when he states that the disloyal sinner will be beaten like a drum in the Lord's Court (v35.10).

Gurdas uses the term *mīṇā* ("scoundrel") in Vār 26 to refer to Guru Hargobind's uncle, Prithi Chand. Vārs 26 and 36 are both parallel in that one underscores primarily Guru Hargobind's authority while the other undermines his rivals. Both declare the true Guru to be the true monarch (*satiguru sachā pātshāh*),

showing that Gurdas's most virulent critiques are not for the state, but for the schismatics. The *mīṇās* are cunning like the cranes at pilgrimage centers, whiners like the rain bird who cannot drink water, unable to take in the fragrance of the Guru like bamboo is unaffected by sandalwood. The true Guru is the true emperor and the scoundrels' faces are blackened in shame (36.1).

In the kabitts, the Vaishnavas and polytheists get the worst of Gurdas's ire. The worshippers of other gods are comparable to a eunuch, a prostitute, a barren woman, and a blind man who cannot enjoy the beauty of the visible world (k443). Trying to get knowledge from a source other than the True Guru is like the blind-leading-the-blind (k474). The Vaishnava worshippers are hypocrites: they say they are dedicated to their one god, yet fear the sight of bad omens as dictated by folk traditions. The same person who is fully devoted to Vishnu, serves Brahmans, the holy stone, and hears the Gita and Bhagavat, embarks on righteous (*dharam*) pilgrimages to various sites after consulting with pandits, betrays his deity when he sees a bad omen and runs back to his house (k447). A son of the jungle king (the lion) would never be subservient to a jackal, nor would the son of the lord-of-wings (*garūr*, the eagle) salute a crow. Similarly, Gurdas points out, it is ludicrous to imagine that the son of a Sikh could worship another god, his life is a waste and he is a bastard (k477).

The worship of other deities does not obliterate one's misdeeds, whereas

serving the Guru is redeeming (k489). In a polemic against the Jogis, Gurdas ask what good is walking on water, not getting burned in fire, or flying? The magical feats of the Jogis (*ridhīs* and *sidhīs*) are the result of the manipulation of the elements, whereas attaining the Gurmukh's state of peace is a real accomplishment (k478).

Not only is the power of the Gurmukhs contagious, but the power of the disloyal is as well, which is why Gurdas seems suspicious of their presence in the community. He says that those who go to other places for worship degrade the holy congregation and ought to leave, as they would not appreciate or understand Sikh life (k452-3). The pious simply cannot win when it comes to contact with the impious: befriending them leads to detriment, but so does villainizing them (k388). An impious person sitting in the congregation is a like a crow sitting in the fabled assembly swans at Mansarovar: he is not there for the pearls, but the dirt (k386).

**Religious tolerance.** Though Gurdas shows little tolerance for the *manmukhs*, particularly those who show dual loyalties, he does not preach intolerance. He reports that Guru Hargobind employed non-Sikhs at his court, distinguished from the ecstatic Sikhs in the following stanza by their “sobriety”:

The emperor's attendants, both drunk and sober, arrive at his throne  
Those present at the court are acknowledged, and the absent are noted  
as well  
The few he considers capable receive invitations to his assembly  
The emperor, in his intelligence, employs both the enamored and the  
indifferent



The sober are put to work serving drinks to the drunks  
The drunks are inebriated, quaffing — they attain the state of equipoise  
The sober butt heads, worshipping (*pñjā nivāz*) and bowing  
Constrained by their holy books (*ved kateb*), they fight amongst  
themselves  
Only the rare attain the Gurmukh's peace (v39.8)

Gurdas allows for the simultaneous superiority of the Sikh community and possibility of truth in other religions: just as there is one sun, but many divisions of time, so can there be an inherent unity of religions, but superiority of Sikhs in accessing the true nature of the divine (v2.14). All religions are traders from the store of truth, but the Sikh Guru is the source of capital as the central banker. The Guru is beyond care (*beparvāh*), and his treasure house is unlimited (40.7). In parts of his writings, Gurdas points to a golden rule of religious tolerance: see the good in others, and do good to others; know that everyone loves their son like you love yours; everyone enjoys wealth like you do; everyone likes to hear themselves praised and not slandered, like you; everyone loves their religion (*karam dharam*) as much as you do (k398). Gurdas implores Sikh followers to discuss issues of knowledge (*giān*) with all people, focus on the positive aspects of people, and ignore the negatives (k399). All people contain divinity ("Ek Oankar") in them like all trees, though vastly different, are full of the same fire (k49). Gurdas reminds his co-religionists that all people hold their son, trade, and deity-of-choice (*isht*) in high regard (k552).

**Altruism and benevolence.** The practice of benevolence (*parupkārī*) is the

highest of conducts (*āchār*), surpassing all the wisdom of the world, and it is for this reason that the holy congregation is redemptive (*patit udhārāṇ*, v25.9). The benevolent Gurmukhs have come into this world for the very reason to help others and their community redeems even the sinners (v28.11). Like a doctor treating a sick patient, the wise person (*bibekī jan*) is a helper-of-others: the benevolent make the world a better place by spreading their religion, a source of healing (k113). Gurdas sings the praises of the benevolent Sikh (*parupkār sādḥ*) who acts only for the sake of others (k564). The Sikh community is a benevolent tree that provides shade (liberation, *udhār*) to the world. The Guru is the root of the tree, and the source of its fragrance and Sikhs are the branches.<sup>12</sup>

Deep suffering increases piety and, as a result, the benevolent spirit (k580-1). Cotton is in the ground, then ginned, then made into rolls and spun into thread, then woven and dyed in boiling water, it is cut with scissors and stitched with needles. But this suffering leads to its usefulness for others when it produces clothes and covers the naked (v4.10). The sugarcane is crushed to produce a sweet juice (k326).

In this sense, the ethic of benevolence, and the belief that the Sikh community is a growing tree, becomes a technique to grow the Panth and survive difficult times. The community is a shade-providing tree, planted by Kartar Himself, from seed to

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<sup>12</sup> See k37-8, v12.13.

root to branch to root, it goes on providing shade to the world.<sup>13</sup> In one fruit there are many seeds, this is the secret of the Sikh way (v13.18). Focusing on the community's growth in this way, drives the attention outward from the community to others, and in the meanwhile it serves the communities needs by giving it good publicity and new-comers. The metaphor of tree provides a theodicy: even when ill is done to it, the Sikhs, like a fruit tree, bear good results (v14.7). Suffering leads to success, but at the doors of the holy, even evil acts are returned with kindness: the tree drops fruit when stoned, is killed to make a boat, which does not hesitate to bring an iron saw to shore. He says that the benevolent one might earn evil from the evil-doer, perhaps explaining why the Sikhs are suffering at the hands of others, and that ultimate justice will be divinely delivered (v31.16-7).

Gurdas uses the earth as a metaphor for patience, humility; that these are the keys to future reward. The earth is lowest of all, steadfast in compassion, righteousness, and contentment, it is patiently trampled underfoot. It touches the feet of the holy, the worthless thing becomes worth-a-million. The poor thing receives honor, and it drinks from the cup of love. As one reaps, so one sows: the Gurmukh's stay meek (v4.2). Sikhs can cultivate a state of fearlessness through love. It is the means by which divine justice works: he who seems to win now will lose in the divine court, and the loser now will be exalted later (v26.9).

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<sup>13</sup> The kind of tree being referred to here is the banyan, famous for its complex structure of roots and branches, and for its ability to provide deep shade.

Gurdas expresses an ethic of welcoming newcomers and embracing other Sikhs that is important to this community, which is understandable because it is a minority community. Sikhs find other Sikhs, and worship each others' feet. Gurmukh's feet are special because they walk the Guru's path, and not on others' (v6.13). Like water and dust—which, perhaps not so coincidentally, would have been the main ingredients of the initiatory feet-nectar—the Sikhs are focused on benevolence and thus are neither burned by fire nor destroyed by freezing, they feel neither suffering nor ecstasy (v28.13-4).

**Rightful attitude.** More important than rule-following is the intention and attitude that one brings to one's actions. The idea that someone would participate in the Sikh way of life out of some kind of compulsion is ludicrous to Gurdas. He scorns the notion that religiosity can be mandated. The true Sikh is the one who acts out of the force of his own love for the Guru (v17.14). These insincere ones are simply talkers, but talking alone cannot replace the hard work that is necessary (v17.17). The two-timer (*dubājarā*) bows to religious authority, not out of love or respect, but out of compulsion—which is of no use (v33.16).

Gurdas's depicts ethics as the realm of the deepest religion, which is consistent with his portrayal of the human body as the site where the religious experience reverberates: the eyes have a glimpse of the divine, and divine grace enters through the ears, plays on the tongue, makes hands and feet fragrant, and a

feeling of wonder soaks up every limb. Only then does the mind's desire tire and yield to focus on the Ultimate (k18, see also k499). In a series of kabitts, Gurdas describes the problems of the mind, and how to control it and the senses.<sup>14</sup> By unifying his thoughts, words, and actions, the Sikh becomes a king who rules over his body (k46, 246). Gurmukhs take part in constant worship, with every breath, and though they may live in a dozen foreign lands (*das vadesiā*; no matter what country) they are unified in this moment-to-moment devotion (v19.7).

Words in the mouth are like an arrow in a bow: once released they do not return. For that reason, we ought to speak cautiously and according to the Guru's teachings (*gurmat*, k630). But not by mere talk, or talk alone, can we give up our vices: ethics requires action (k539). The efficacy of Sikh practice is not made apparent until one gives oneself over to the Guru (*gur darsi jai ... samāye*): talking is not enough (k539). In the holy congregation, there is a feedback mechanism that heightens experience: the singer in the congregation, performing the word, watches other Sikhs worship and participates in their devotion, and this inspires a love and peace within the singer (k566-7). This love, in the singer, probably then would manifest in an even more heightened experience had by the listeners.

**The word is earned.** The divine word possesses a deep, inner content that is only made known to the one who hears it, allows it to enter his being, and enacts it.

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<sup>14</sup> See k225-37, k581.

The above-discussed attitude that Gurdas requires of Sikhs allows them to interact with the Guru's word and reap its positive effects on their lives. Gurdas frequently matches the divine word (*shabad*) with the verb "to earn" (*kamāunā*), which implies that a Sikh earns the benefits of the word like merit (see v14.10, v20.4). It is not just the word that can be earned, but others earn whatever they want to earn in their religious practices also: thus, Hindus "earn" *tantar* and *mantar* (v13.23, as we will see later, Gurdas is speaking mockingly). The holy congregation, where the word is heard, is the land of ethical action (*sukrit bhūmī*) and the fruits of those labor actions beget liberation (*udhār*, k126). Like friends sit around a kitchen, eating and talking, so do the Guru's Sikhs meet in the dharamsāl and enjoy the bliss of the nectar-word (k559). Talk alone will not deliver us to the land of the beloved, we must walk the path; and "putting into practice" is a second connotation of the above-discussed verb *kamāunā*. Merely discussing treatment with the doctor does not lead to a cure (k439). Only by repetitive writing can one become a writer. As such, the inner meaning of the word, and the state of understanding it deeply, only comes with relentless study (*khojat khojat*, k588).

**The fruits of right action.** Our past actions have directed us to today's experience as an aimed bow shoots arrows where they are directed (k610). A number of boons are granted to the Sikh based on his actions. As discussed above, one of these is wealth (*māiā*). But the Sikh need not ask for wealth: food, clothes,

and tax (*jugāt*, from *zakāt*, the Muslim notion of tithe) are poured onto the true Guru's house like rain (k629).

A second, and more consequential, effect than material wealth is knowledge, to which the Gurmukh has special access. The Guru's word is the initial source of divine wisdom (*giān*), but living the life of the Gurmukh reveals even deeper levels of knowledge. Only the Gurmukh understands Kartar's omni-presence (v9.6). Gurdas compares Kartar's omnipresence to the ability of a musician to play many instruments, enjoying his own music, while engrossed in it. Only the Gurmukh reaps the benefit of Kartar's omnipresence (v2.2, v2.7), his knowledge of divine unity amongst a multiplicity of forms is salvific (v2.9).

Third, the Gurmukh achieves ineffable, pleasurable experiences as a result of his conduct. For Gurdas, the Sikh community is an expanding banyan tree, which produces a fruit that stands for the most sublime of religious experiences, which he calls *Gurmukh sukh phal* (v6.4). Whereas all other experiences are rooted in the ego, all virtues are found with the *Gurmukh sukh phal*, and in the holy congregation, this nectar destroys the ego's ill effects (v38.19). This experience is ineffable, beyond all description (v38.18). Only those who walk the path know the experience, but the only way to access it is to commit to the community by becoming a Gurmukh. The Gurmukh's is the true community (*sachā panth*), they partake in the fruit of peace and attain a state of fearlessness (v28.9-10). The

Gurmukh earns victory over his body, he is not of two minds, he finds family in the community (*mā piu bhai mita*, v5.2). Gurdas proclaims that by renouncing un-Sikh practices, the Gurmukh finds an experience more valuable than a garland of diamonds (v5.10). Whether through audience with the Guru, or by hearing the word, or by service and action, the Guru and Gurmukh become one and the Gurmukh achieves the easy state (*sahaj*, k50-1). As opposed to the parlor tricks of the so-called perfected siddhs (walking on water, not getting burned in fire, flying), attaining a Gurmukh's peace is a substantive accomplishment (k478, see also k42).

The ultimate effects of living the Gurmukh way of life are liberation from the universe of cause-and-effect and liberation in the divine court of the afterlife. Gurdas seems to portray two parallel opinions about how liberation is achieved. For one, he says the Gurmukh's liberation is divinely guaranteed (v19.1-4). The Gurmukhs need not worry about their liberation: the Guru has ordained it.<sup>15</sup>

Elsewhere, Gurdas depicts liberation as something to be achieved by work. It is like a tradeoff: a bride surrenders dowry to her in-laws, which she retrieves at the eventual marriage of her son. Similarly, we sacrifice mind, body, and wealth to the Guru and we eventually realize immortality (k584). The Gurmukh's life is fruitful and leads to liberation, he finds a new family in the holy congregation (v6.5). Still elsewhere Gurdas says that being constrained in the life of a Gurmukh is better than

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<sup>15</sup> See v20.3, k87, k486, k488.



achieving liberation (k154).

**The straight path.** The first chapter of the Qur'an, Sura al-Fatiha, articulates an appeal to the divine for assistance in traveling "the road straight". According to Qur'an scholar Michael Sells, "the term rendered here as road, sirat, would have connoted something grand to the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula." The value of a paved, Roman road, buttressed on both sides by brick walls, would have been registered by travelers, nomads, and tradesmen.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, the image of the cart road was well burned into the psyche of the well-traveled Gurdas, and the term *gāḍḍī rāh* takes an important place in his poetry. The True Guru is the True King who has put the Gurmukh on the *gāḍḍī rāh* (v5.13). The *manmukh* wanders from place to place because of his ego, while the Gurmukh is on the Guru's high road (v5.19-20). Like grass is trampled underfoot but remains resurgent, the Sikh community will overcome its hard times. As the highway cart travels on beaten tracks, so should Sikhs follow the established traditions (*miriād*) of worship (*dharamsāl*, *kirtan*) and thus find transcendence (v9.14).

When not referred to as the high cart road, the Sikh way of life is depicted by other metaphors, like the path of the pious (*Gurmukh mārag*). Vār 28 highlights the difficulty of the Sikh way of life (*gur sikhī*), promising that path of the

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Anthony Sells, *Approaching the Quran: The Early Revelation* (Oregon: White Cloud Pr, 1999), 42-3.

Gurmukhs is not traveled by a single step. Discipleship is like a labyrinth, and deliverance depends on divine grace. Still, the fearless Sikhs bear evil with patience, and earn their way assiduously. The way of the Gurmukh Panth is a difficult and subtle one. It is thinner than a hair, sharper than a sword; ineffable, beyond description. It is not walked by a single step, but by pleasing the True Guru and by living according to his teachings (*gurmat*, v28.1).

Sikh piety is transformative. Like coming in contact with sandal's fragrance is transformative, like touching fire enflames, so is the contagion of the pious (*sādh*, k625). The Gurmukh considers himself the lowest of the low; falling at the feet of others, he becomes feet-dust and loses his sense of self. He speaks sweetly, walks humbly, and gives of what he earns. One with the word, he understands that life is temporary, and finds peace amongst this world of desire (v8.24). The oneness of divinity parallels the lack of social divisions in the holy congregation: the Gurmukh Panth has lost its sense of binaries by focusing on the oneness of the Supreme Being (v5.9). Gurdas traces the prevalent Sikh ethics of his time to the Sikh founder. Guru Nanak taught that losing one's sense of self and attaining humility were prior in necessity to ritual observance to pilgrimage rules. Thereby, Gurmukhs lose their caste identities, and walk the Sikh path with humility. Only by their ethical living does their hard work earn them merit in the divine court (v1.25).

A large amount of data from Gurdas's works reveals a deep concern for using this well-established tradition of piety to overcome suffering. The established Sikh traditions are part and parcel of the continuation of the Gurmukh way of life. Vār 14, loaded with metaphors about the importance of suffering, ends on a positive by telling Sikhs what they can actually do: fetch water, grind wheat, stoke wood, take care of the poor, sing the word, wash feet, and feed the Gurmukhs (v14.18-20). As we saw in the previous section on codes of conduct, Vār 19 details the qualities of the Gurmukh. The most important of these is that the Gurmukh recognizes life's transience, and labors in the way of brotherly love (*bhau bhagatī*) to obtain a peaceful state (*sukh phal*). He helps to bring new members into the community (*sākhī shabad sikhi suṇāiā*), and the entire community will attain liberation (*dar parvāṇiā, janam savārī dargāh chaliā*). Though they may bear suffering, the pious do not give up their benevolent ways (v11.2). The true Guru (Nanak) has left his Sikhs a number of true things: congregation, *mantar*, community (*panth*), philosophy, word, and throne. The holy congregation is the Realm of Truth (*sach khand*, a term borrowed from Guru Nanak), and what is practiced here has currency in the hereafter (v6.1).

Gurdas is making a powerful statement: God's own abode, the most difficult place to reach and the highest of states, is available in the congregation of Sikhs by living an ethical life. He is making a powerful connection between his poetry and

Guru Nanak's, one that Sikhs who read their daily prayers would understand very clearly. The Gurmukh knows that the world is temporary, and "to go" (*chalan jān*) is part of the natural processes of life. He lives in the world like a guest, and the poet is a sacrifice to that one who loses his sense of self (v30.15). The Gurmukh is faithful to the end (*Gurmukhi nibahe nāli, gur sikh pāliai*, v3.14). As opposed to falsehood, truth is a gallant warrior in battle. To die while fighting and attain righteousness in battle is the Gurmukh community's highest glory (v30.14).

## **Conclusion**

In Gurdas's writings, the Sikh mission of bringing in new members is at a high point. A major part of Gurdas's project is to bring in new members to the community while consolidating their exclusive allegiance to Guru Hargobind. That his sectarian group's funds were re-directed to their rivals may have had something to do with Gurdas's desire to expand his group's members among previously unconverted peoples. Whatever the reason, and we will see this, Gurdas is extremely excited about the continual growth of the community.

A community concerned with controlling every aspect of a practitioner's life, that was highly concerned with rules, does not fit Gurdas's notion of the kind of community that would expand in huge numbers in his South Asian context. Gurdas wants Sikhs to be driven by the spirit of the Guru's word, more than by the letters

of his laws. This distancing of the tradition from a reliance on rules and emphasis on a simple code of ethics seems to be a “selling point” for Gurdas. A major section of Vār 39 portrays the Sikh tradition as a drunken party amongst, and opposed to, the rule-oriented religions. The rules of this religion are simple, the members revel in an internal experience of bliss, the leader (Guru Hargobind) is both a king and a holy man, emperor and cup-bearing mystic:

Sitting in the upper window, the emperor opens the shutter and holds  
court  
Inside is the throne of the palace, outside, the people wait for audience  
The emperor drinks from the cup, and inside the palace he serves the  
chosen elite  
He serves both the drunks and the sober, showing every other how to  
drink  
But the sober refuse, don’t drink, and only serve  
The exalted cup of compassion is offered to only a few  
But if they are incapable, the offenders are forgiven  
Only those know of love’s liquor to whom He makes it known  
The rare Gurmukh grasps the Ungraspable

Pouring over holy books are the sober — Hindus and Muslims  
Muslims belong to “Khuda,” Hindus follow “Hari’s” orders  
One puts faith in the *kalimāh* and circumcision, the other is happy  
tying threads and smearing sacred marks  
Mecca belongs to the Muslims, Hindus have their Ganga and Benaras  
Keeping *roza* fasts, having read *nimāz*; keeping *vrat* fasts, having  
performed *pūjā*  
Each with four schools and castes, six houses with six creeds  
Muslims call it Pīr-Murīdī, Hindus call it Guru-Sikhī  
Hindus hold fast to ten descents, Muslims look to One for mercy  
Thus they pull and they push

Only choice drunkards go to the assembly, grasping love’s cup they  
attain the Ungraspable  
Breaking *mālā* and *tasbī*, they care not for 100 or 108

Mixing beads from each, they don't consider "Ram" or "Rahim"  
The two are the same one reality (*vājūd*), the game is the same  
They surpass Shiva and Shakti, love's cup brings them home  
Surpassing three elements, they obtain the fourth state  
"Guru Govind" is the divine preceptor, Sikhs know "pīr murīdī"  
Revealing the true word, they immerse in hearing it  
In truth, they love the true emperor (v39.9-11)

Thus, in Gurdas's vision, the major share of rules enforcement was left to individuals, rather than the group. He hoped to create for his tradition the reputation of a free flowing, welcoming community rather than an iron-fisted one. This strategy makes sense in the context of a young, growing religious community.

Furthermore, with the community expanding into areas well beyond the Sikh center in the Majha region of Punjab, the center had not yet developed techniques to regulate conduct in distant or peripheral areas. The center's chief concerns were for exclusivity and the flow of material and personal resources, which they negotiated through the system of representatives of the Guru known as masands. Furthermore, the Sikh community encouraged visits to the Sikh center, having personal audience with the Guru. A loosely organized, spiritually energized group of followers stretching from Kashmir to Kabul in the north and west, to the Deccan and Bengal in the south and east, was deemed the most adept at ensuring communal growth.

Ethical living was a central part of the Sikh religious message from the time of the community's founding, and Gurdas provides Sikhs with advice on how to

pursue their spiritual goals amidst the distractions of an active, worldly life. For Gurdas, ethical contribution to Sikh society is the hallmark of religious life, and at the core of his ethics is the concept that one will be known by one's actions. Gurdas's moral directives were intended to help Sikhs navigate turbulent times, and have continued to influence Sikh life and identity over the centuries. As Nripinder Singh attests, Gurdas's ethics strongly influenced Sikh intellectuals of the early twentieth century as they addressed the challenges that modernity posed to their religion.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Singh, *The Sikh Moral Tradition: Ethical Perceptions of the Sikhs in the Late Nineteenth / Early Twentieth Century*.

## Chapter Five

### Bodies in Bliss: Early Sikh Practices

Pure inside, pure outside  
Pure outside, and pure inside  
They act in the Guru's way.  
— Guru Amardas (GG 919)

In this dissertation, I argue that Gurdas's works are crucial to understanding Sikh religious life: its practices, ethics, and definition of identity around 1600. His writings reveal the anxieties of a growing religious community, and how it sought to overcome historical challenges. When Gurdas's compositions are seen alongside other contemporary writings—epistles from the Gurus, emerging hagiographical literature, travelers' accounts, and writings of rival sectarian groups—a much clearer picture of Sikh religious life in the seventeenth century begins to emerge. From Sikh scripture, we know what Sikhs believed; Gurdas can help us better understand how Sikhs practiced as a distinct religious group, treated newcomers, and demanded exclusive allegiance.

This chapter explores how Gurdas's works serve as an important source for ritual life within the early Sikh community, and fulfills five ends. First we excavate Gurdas's theories about the role of collective religious practices and their results—



particularly his articulations about the importance of the body in Sikh life. Second, we use Gurdas's compositions to assert the primary importance of the *baṇī* (Guru's word) in Sikh practices: kirtan, daily prayer, and enactment of its teachings. Third, we use the same method to understand collective Sikh practices: the importance of service, the celebration of Sikh holy days, and how members participated in running their community. Fourth, we turn our attention to a set of community-building rituals of greeting, welcoming, and initiation. Finally, we look at Gurdas's view of other religions and how these opinions help to articulate Sikh self-conception and a sophisticated, "second order" understanding of religious practice.

By Sikh practices, I mean those activities whose performance either fulfills the disciple's obligations, or demonstrates the disciple's allegiance, to the Sikh Guru and the community. Conversely, un-Sikh practices position the Sikh further from the Guru or community, and mark a deviation from the Sikh's dedication to those entities. Gurdas promises soteriological and experiential boons and merit for the proper enactment of practices. Such benefits, however, remain an afterthought for Gurdas. His main concern is to solidify the boundaries of the community in a time of peril, and his writings dictate to members of the community which actions will be beneficial to the disciple's religious quest, and to the community's existence and growth.

## **Gurdas as Theorist**

A century after the community's inception, Gurdas's interpretation of Sikh life provides the first textual reflection on basic Sikh practices outside of the Sikh scripture. In his writings, Sikh practices are theorized and legitimated, and their logic supported. These practices had been key to the spread of the Sikh tradition: performance of the scriptural compositions in the congregation, sharing of the communal meal in the free kitchen, and daily liturgical readings of the Guru's writings. Understanding the interactions of the bodies of the community's members provides another lens to understanding communal growth, in addition to knowledge of Sikh ideas. Gurdas is very clear about the importance of physicality in these interactions: seeing, hearing, singing, tasting, walking, and touching.

For Gurdas, the body is the means and the locus of the experience of Sikh religiosity. This experience entails a supra-ordinary, intimate, and ineffable engagement with the Guru. Sikh religious experiences earn merit and good favors for the practitioner, and wipe away the ill effects of past actions. Most importantly, the experiences involved in Sikh practices develop the practitioner towards the ideal of piety: the Gurmukh.

**Bodily bliss.** In numerous kabitts, and with much more emphasis than in the vārs, Gurdas lays out a tripartite schema of Sikh worship, which incorporates the

bodily faculties of eyes, ears, and tongue (which relate to sight, sound, and either taste or singing, see Kabitts 431-2, translated below). The metaphors standing in for each of these faculties are the moth (which sees the flame and gives itself over), the deer (which hears the hunters' horn and is transfixed), and the bee (which seeks the nectar of flowers). On the physical level, these metaphors represent the Guru, his writings, and the sweetness of participation in the congregation. On the spiritual level, they represent the experience of the divine, of the divine word, and of the immortal nectar (*amrit*). This tripartite scheme corresponds to another: the visible form of the Guru is the object of focus (*dhiān*), the aural form is the divine word revealed (*giān*), and most important is how these are enacted (*karnī*).

mind ( <i>man</i> )	words ( <i>bach</i> )	actions ( <i>karam</i> )
focus ( <i>dhiān</i> )	knowledge ( <i>giān</i> )	doing ( <i>karnī</i> )
<i>guru</i>	<i>bāṇī</i>	<i>sangat</i>
eyes	ears	tongue

In the vārs, Gurdas declares that the Guru, the congregation, and the holy word are the three exclusive places of shelter for the Sikh.<sup>18</sup> In the kabitts he presents another tri-fold structure: the function of the eyes (seeing), ears (hearing), and tongue (singing and tasting).<sup>19</sup>

Eyes of the moth, once set on a flame  
are incapable of turning away

<sup>18</sup> This is: *guru sangat bāṇī binā dujī oṭ nahīn hai raī* (v1.42).

<sup>19</sup> The functions of the tongue, singing and tasting are also related to the rain bird (chatrik) that sings after he has tasted nectar.

Deer's ears, lured by the hunter's horn  
let it be still nevermore  
Tongue-tied, tasting the sap of lotus(-feet)  
the bee(-mind) is trapped by pleasure  
Love's liquor (prem ras) is perfect, and delivers perfection  
all other tricks and potions only confuse (k431)

Though physical audience with the Guru can only happen at the Sikh center, the Guru's words can be performed and enjoyed remotely, as can ethical action and service be performed anywhere. The Sikh can participate in the Guru's presence through the Guru's word (*shabad*): not only is it the object of focus (*dhiān*), but leads to knowledge (*giān*) as well. Experiences with the word compare to physical audience with the Guru. Finally, one can participate with the Guru through serving him, and become his servant (*sevak*) through self-less service (*nihkām karnī*, k50). When thoughts, words, and actions come together,<sup>20</sup> the practitioner's body undergoes a wondrous experience:

When creed, speech, and deeds converge, the Gurmukh's  
every limb immerses in the body divine (*srabang*)  
Drunk on love's liquor, the ambrosial treasure,  
The stilled tongue can speak no more  
The luster of love's light astonishes so!  
Leaving eyes in perplexed gaze  
Love's song strikes awe  
and echoes in ears bewildered (k52)

Drinking the subtle nectar of the Guru's love, the practitioner becomes drunk, a wondrous light dawns in the eyes, and an awesome sound resounds in the ears.

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<sup>20</sup> Gurdas says *man-bach-karam*, but it also corresponds to *giān-dhiān-karnī*.

Gurdas expands on the reason why action is efficacious: the microcosm of the body (*pind prān*) replicates the universe's macrocosm (*khand brahmand*). The entire universe is bound up in every touch, taste, sound, sight, and smell (k53). There are other important correspondences between the human world and the divine: the congregation (*sangat*) lies in the divine dimension, or Realm of Truth (*sachkhand*); the Guru is immersed in the *sangat*; the Guru's bodily form is a manifestation of divine form (k125).

Understanding of the Guru's word is what delivers a Sikh, and is the key to Sikh spiritual achievement. The Guru's grace grants understanding, but it also requires cultivation of the self by righteous living. Whereas Gurdas sometimes emphasizes spiritual understanding being the result of spontaneous grace, he elsewhere says it requires a life of good conduct (*rahit*, k437).

Regardless, understanding is not only an intellectual process, but one of total mental and physical knowledge that brings bliss and perfected states. Though he upholds the established notion of "liberation in life" (*jivanmuktī*) as a spiritual stage, Gurdas does not claim one definitive end to religious achievement. The point of the religious practices is to continue to enact one's daily existence in full consciousness of the Guru, and his teachings, and complete dedication to the community. Gurdas's theorization culminates in the declaration of the ineffability of the religious experience:

Only he knows the splendor of love's liquor who has experienced it,  
booze-drunk imbeciles are known the world over (from k173)

The Sikh path is secret and mysterious. Only the Guru and his Sikh know the  
experience:

A dream's images are only known by the dreamer  
how could another see them?  
Words spoken into a tube are heard by the one at the other end  
other than speaker and listener, who can guess?  
The flower sucks water from its roots  
drinking to its heart's content  
Guru and Sikh converge, taking delight in secrets  
knowledge and focus, the ways of love's liquor astonish (k305)

Gurdas is very conscious of how advertising his tradition's "secrets" will help  
undermine the claims of its rivals. The very first stanza of the vārs as we receive  
them today lists the important practices that lead the Sikhs to deliverance—taking  
shelter at the Guru's feet, engaging the divine word, living in loving devotion,  
celebrating the Guru's holidays—immediately after making a dig at the cynics and  
detractors who are opposed to the community (*sākat durjan*):

Salutations! To my dear Guru, who imparted the holy word to me —  
"satinām"  
He lifted me out of the ocean of fear, and delivered me to liberation  
Eradicating the fear of births and deaths, anxiety, pain, and separation  
Anxiety is the world's way, pain is ever-increasing  
Death's club waves overhead, the villains (*sākat, durjan*) fall victim  
When I arrived at Guru-dev's feet, he liberated me with the true word  
Celebrating the Guru's days in love and devotion, I hold fast to *nām*  
*dān isnān*  
We reap as we sow (v1.1)

Two stanzas after that, Gurdas claims that Sikh life is the best amongst the millions of forms of life in God's creation and lists even more actions that Sikhs take: understanding the Guru's word, pleasing other Sikhs, drinking feet nectar, and falling at the feet of other Sikhs:

Among the myriad forms of life, highest is the human's  
Eyes to see, ears to hear, speak and hear good words  
Hands to do good works, Feet to meet the true congregation  
Work hard in righteousness, earn and feed, do good acts  
The Gurmukh's life is salvific, he reads, understands and hears the  
bāṇī  
Satisfying his brothers-in-the-Guru, he drinks their feet-nectar  
He never leaves the feet-falling tradition; it is the only way in the  
Dark Age  
He crosses and brings others across (v1.3).

A primary concern of Gurdas's writings is to navigate the tumultuous times in which Sikhs are living, and clarifying the benefits of the community's religious practices figures prominently within this project.

### **Interacting with the Revelation**

For Gurdas, interacting with the divine word, as revealed to the first five Sikh Gurus, is at the core of Sikh religious practice.<sup>21</sup> This interaction takes a number of

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<sup>21</sup> Gurdas refers to these revelations by a handful of names. Typically, *bāṇī*, or *updes* refer to the words of the Gurus, and *pothī*, or *kitāb* to refer to the coda that contain those words. Most commonly, Gurdas uses the word *shabad* to refer to the divine revelation, not only in its form, but in the deep experience of divine knowledge (*giān*) that it makes possible. For a discussion of the foundational uses of the term *shabad* in Indian traditions, please see Charlotte Vaudeville, "Tantric Concepts and Language in Kabir's Verses," in *Kabir. Volume 1* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974).

forms, the most important of which is singing—kirtan. Daily repetition of the liturgy is also highly important. These two are followed in importance by discussing the meaning of the divine revelations with others, contemplating through the Guru's formulas (*mantar*), and propagating the reproduction of the word through writing and copying manuscripts.

**Singing the word.** Using powerful metaphors from Guru Nanak's own compositions and from the writings of the Sikh bards, Gurdas says that in the true Guru's court, Sikhs are the minstrels (*ḍhāḍī*) who sing the *bāṇī*, which is the community's royal standard (*nisān*, v3.3). Gurdas is clear that Sikh practice of kirtan dates back to the time of Guru Nanak, who himself actively presided over the performance of his compositions, and who inspired collective singing of his own hymns, "from house to house".<sup>22</sup> Not only did the founder listen to kirtan, but his successors did as well, and may have even performed it (v24.19, v26.24). Gurdas himself reports being a leader of the devotional singing of the Guru's hymns (k501, k611). Sikh kirtan in Gurdas's day is the continuation of the ways of the Gurmukh Panth as founded by Guru Nanak.<sup>23</sup>

Gurdas describes kirtan performance in aural terms. Kirtan seems to have been led by a few singers, but the entire congregation was expected to sing along.

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<sup>22</sup> See v.1.38, 1.27. See also v24.1-2.

<sup>23</sup> See v9.14. Here Gurdas refers to the "cart road," or *gāḍḍī rāh*, which was discussed in depth in the chapter on ethics and conduct.



The performative relationship between members of the congregation drives the ascending enjoyment of the kirtan, and the deliverance of the performer to a state of perfect love (*puran prem*), what some translators have called “the easy state” (*sahaj*, k566-7). Gurdas reports that the chorus singers’ depth of devotion has a profound impact on the lead performers, which in turn resonates in the height of experience for the entire congregation.

The opportunity to hear kirtan is a special one; the tradition of Sikh music (*sangīt rīt*) is well established and utilizes the Hindustani classical structure, vocals, and instruments (*rāg nād bād*, k500). In the hands of the adroit, music effects a truer reflection on the divine word. The pious are accomplished and intelligent connoisseurs (*sugar sujān*) who sing various musical measures,<sup>24</sup> which allows them to reflect on the word (*shabad vichār*) and allows the truth to be revealed to them (*sach sijhāṇiai*, v19.4).

Gurdas describes a sophisticated conception of musical performance within the Sikh congregation. It is not just the music that is important, but the transcendent meaning brought to high relief by the setting of the word to music (v.6.10). The sound of the congregation’s kirtan is like “the thundering of dark storm clouds”; “divine light flashes like lightning,” and the “nectar of immortality showers over the congregation” (k128). Innumerable conversations or disputations

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<sup>24</sup> The musical measures referred to are *mājh* and *malhār*, interestingly both rainy season *rāgs*. See k128 which talks about the rain of the divine word.

about the word (*giān gosht*) are contained within the transcendent enjoyment of the musically performed word, which has the ineffable and unique power of pulling the practitioner into a deeper level of meaning (k254).

The enjoyment of the divine word is not just an aspect of aural experience, but one of the tongue's taste as well. Gurdas says that the Guru's Sikhs, gathering in the dharamsāl to enjoy the pleasure of the *shabad*, are like friends sitting in a kitchen enjoying a meal (k559). Members of all segments of society (*chār varan*) meet in the congregation and enjoy the five sounds of music like the connoisseur of betel enjoys its five tastes (v3.16).

The sensual experience discussed above is efficacious: the tasting of the divine, immortal, ambrosial word brings the practitioner's the fickle mind under control (v20.6). However, listening to kirtan has an efficacy that goes well beyond a sensual enjoyment. The Sikh who divorces himself from his sense organs and does not allow his mind to wander while listening consciously to the *bānī* will be absorbed into a higher state and be delivered to the shores of immortality (v3.19). In consecutive stanzas in the kabitts, Gurdas drives home the point that the divine is present in the congregation, and that the congregation dictates to Kartar. Kartar, who can destroy galaxies with one glimpse, lives in the love between members of the Sādh Sangat during kirtan time (k302-3). For this reason then, divine grace is immanent in the congregation and kirtan's efficacy has replaced that of the Hindu

books, Vedas and Purāṇs, though they may be read a million more times (v3.10).

Gurdas promises that those who go to the congregation, take shelter with the Guru, and hear the word will be entered by the word (v14.1). However, consecutive stanzas in Vār 28 underscore the point that learning the Guru's words and understanding them are part of the responsibility of the disciple. Not only is passive listening not an efficacious part of the formula: the Sikh must work hard to live by the Guru's words (v28.5-6).

**Daily prayer.** Rising in the last part of the night, bathing, and in the morning sitting in Sangat after putting a red mark (*tilak*, or *tikkā*) on the forehead were important parts of early Sikh worship (v6.3, k613). Gurdas underscores the established Sikh belief, dating back to the community's founding, that there is a special religious importance to the early morning: whoever enjoys the communion (*prasād*) of the word at this time will reach liberation (k361). Core to the morning worship was recitation of Guru Nanak's *Jap*, which unifies the Sikh community in worship.<sup>25</sup> Along with the *Jap* in the morning, Gurdas says Sikhs sing the hymns called *Sodar* and *Ārtī* in the evening (v1.38). Elsewhere, Gurdas adds *Kirtan Sohela* to this, which is also included the beginning-portion of the Guru Granth, commonly known as the liturgical core of the Sikh tradition (v6.3).

**Discussing the word.** The teaching and understanding of *bāṇī* are a

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<sup>25</sup> The text is: *ik man hoi jap japande* (v6.3, v12.2).

substantial part of Gurdas's idea of Sikh piety and must have been instrumental to the transmission of Sikh heritage, the community's education, and its growth. Gurdas reveals information about a practice in which the Sikh Guru called his disciples to come together in a meeting known as the *sākhā* for the purpose of bestowing knowledge.<sup>26</sup> Discussions about Guru Nanak's compositions were commonplace in the first Sikh community in Kartarpur (v1.38). Gurdas says that the pious Sikh reads the Guru's word, understands it, and conveys that understanding to his fellows (v1.3). The inner meaning of the word is revealed only after relentless study (*khojat khojat*, k588). Divine knowledge from the *bāṇī* are the Sikhs' "weapons" versus the five vices. Sikhs attain a state of fearlessness by, among other things, engaging in discussions about the knowledge in the congregation (k135, see also k254). Not only must one participate in the congregation, but one should speak to others of the Guru's teachings: this will help others find the shores of immortality (v12.2). One should spread the Guru's teachings and bring new Sikhs into the fold (v12.6).

**The Guru-mantar.** Although Gurdas posits the repetition of the Guru-*mantar* (a particular formula for repetition) as a central aspect of Sikh practices, he is clear about his disdain for the use of *mantars* by others. Typically, when Gurdas

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<sup>26</sup> *Sākhā* seems to come from Sanskrit *śākhā* for "sect" or "school" and has been interpreted by commentators on this stanza to mean a collection of Sikhs assembled for the purposes of instruction on Sikh beliefs (k415). Gurdas adds that it is not the Guru's fault if some participants fail to learn anything from it.

uses the word *mantar*, he does so as part of a pejorative phrase—*tantar-mantar*—to describe a number of miscellaneous practices, a sort of “this and that” of practices relating to charms and incantations performed in his Indian context.<sup>27</sup> *Mantar* also means to him a magical formula intended to help cure snake bites, as well as a method used by snake charmers to control snakes.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, it is the magical, miraculous nature of *tantar-mantar* that Gurdas derides (v1.19).

For Gurdas, the true Guru’s word is the authentic *mantar*, and Sikhs hold no belief or faith (*pratīti*) in others’ *tantar-mantar* (k183). *Mantar* is one of the basic, perfect things that the Guru (I believe here he specifically means Guru Nanak) gave to the Sikhs along with sangat, Panth, philosophy, divine word, and a throne (v6.1). The pious Sikh practices repetition of the *mantar* early in the morning, immediately before reciting Guru Nanak’s *Jap*, the most important composition in Sikh liturgy.<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, in one passage, Gurdas says Sikhs are to handle, or collect, the *mantar* (*samhāl*, v20.5). So perhaps he sees the repetition of *mantar* as a tool to collect the mind to prepare it for the real work of reciting the Guru Nanak’s liturgical composition. But repetition of the *mantar* is not something to be done mindlessly; one must feel the effects in one’s heart (v20.14).

There is no singular Sikh *mantar*. Sometimes Gurdas calls *satinām* (“Name is

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<sup>27</sup> See v1.41, v13.23, v36.15, v39.16.

<sup>28</sup> See v38.3, k494, k557. See also k231.

<sup>29</sup> See v20.5, v26.4, k613.

Truth”) the Guru *mantar* (v1.1 and v1.23). In other places, it seems that Gurdas identifies the preamble to Guru Nanak’s *Jap* (today called *mūl mantar*, or *mukh updes*) to be the *mantar* and offers extensive line-by-line commentary on it, something he very rarely does with the Guru’s words.<sup>30</sup> Most commonly, Gurdas uses the term *gur-mantar* for the word *Vahiguru* (“praised be the Guru”), which was entered into the Sikh textual record by one of the bards whose compositions are recorded in the Guru Granth.<sup>31</sup> As in *vār* stanza 11.3, Gurdas later says that not only is “Vahiguru” the *gur-mantar*, but its recitation facilitates the ego’s disintegration (v13.2). The ways of the divine are mysterious and ineffable; we can only offer praise by saying “Vahiguru” and by singing the *shabad* (v9.13). There are hints that the word *Vahiguru* may have had ritual significance for Sikhs.<sup>32</sup> Elsewhere, Gurdas equates “Vahiguru” with the *shabad*.<sup>33</sup> Moreover in the final stanza to the *vārs*, the *mantar* is three-fold: Gurdas tells Sikhs to put the words “Satnam, Kartapurakh, Vahiguru” in their hearts (v40.22). It cannot be distinguished from certain uses of “*shabad*” like in Kabitt 284, in which he says: when we hear the *shabad* continuously we become intoxicated and lose our minds.

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<sup>30</sup> See v3.15. In v6.19 Gurdas calls the preamble the “*mūl mantar*”. For information about how this pre-ample developed in over the history of early Sikh manuscripts, please see: Mann, *The Making of Sikh Scripture*, 53-4.

<sup>31</sup> GG 1402.

<sup>32</sup> See v4.17, v7.11, v11.3.

<sup>33</sup> v6.5, v12.17, v1.49

Furthermore, Gurdas's *mantars* are derived from Sikh scripture, and thereby are an extension of the word. Stripped of magical and curative aspects, Gurdas's notion of *mantar* seems to parallel *dhikr*, the Sufi practice of remembering God.<sup>34</sup>

**Inscribing the word.** As we have seen from the above treatments of *shabad* and *mantar*, Gurdas tells us that just hearing the word is not enough—one must sing it as well. Daily repetition of the liturgy is important. However, no interaction with the word can be done just ceremonially—grappling with its meaning is key. This is how Gurdas feels about all practice. That is to say, one must enact the word.

The divine word being so central to Sikh life, what could have been of greater service to the community—and more fulfilling to the servant—than perpetuating the existence of the coda that contained it? We know from manuscript evidence that from the early seventeenth century onward, the Kartarpur Pothis were copied repeatedly, which coincides with the time of Gurdas's writing about this process.<sup>35</sup> Part of Gurdas's depiction of Guru Arjan as a great king is highlighting the fifth Guru's great success at implementing the mint of truth and compiling a "storehouse

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<sup>34</sup> See: Arthur Buehler, *Sufi Heirs of the Prophet: The Indian Naqshbandiyya and the Rise of the Mediating Sufi Shaykh* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1998), 125-30.

<sup>35</sup> "On the basis of the information available in the seventeenth-century manuscripts, we now know that the Kartarpur Pothis began to be copied soon after its compilation and that these texts proliferated as the times passed by" (Mann, *The Making of Sikh Scripture*, 16.) See also page 71: Extant manuscripts that were copies of the Kartarpur Pothis record colophons from Common Era years 1605, 1610, 1637, 1640, and 1641.

of the divine word” (*gurbāṇī bhandār*), a subtle reference to the Kartarpur Poṭhi.<sup>36</sup>

Gurdas himself was the scribe of this manuscript, and this form of participation in the community’s growth was one that he knew well, and would have been well known for. Gurdas both beckons Sikhs to do the copying, and describes the merit gained by those who undertake this task. It seems that Gurdas was trying to inspire capable volunteers to do the copying, whereas there is also evidence in Sikh history of paid scribes copying scriptural manuscripts as well.

We are told of the great sacrifice of the sesame seed, and the process by which it is made most useful. The seed is crushed to make oil, which burns in lamps. The burnt soot from these lamps is turned into ink, with which disciples write the divine word. The process of writing itself is a form of praise of that divinity which cannot be written or described (*alekh*). Gurdas implores Sikhs to give themselves over, like the sesame seed, thereby making their lives useful and finding peace (v14.10). Just as walking the path of the Guru earns merit for the feet, and sight of the Guru earns merit for the eyes, those hands that write the Guru’s word are meritorious.<sup>37</sup> Gurdas reveals how important pothīs, individual manuscripts, are to the community: *Bāṇī* is written and bound in the pothīs for keeping, when the Guru’s Sikhs read and hear it they are immediately engrossed (k562). Transcribing

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<sup>36</sup> See v24.19. See also *bhagatī bhandār* in v26.1.

<sup>37</sup> Transliteration: *hast saphal nām satgur bāṇī likhai* (k91).



the word is in line with understanding it (v28.5).

**Imbibing the word.** A major emphasis of Gurdas's works, in addition to his descriptions about what Sikhs do or ought to do, is his contention that formulaic performance is not nearly enough. Gurdas insists that there are deep and mind-orienting experiences to be had by the engaged Sikh practitioner, which are only possible if he or she surrenders agency and accepts the Guru's gift of love. For example, in the eighth stanza of the Third Vār, Gurdas explains how the word makes liberative states possible. Listening to it transports us to the divine court, where our hearts are washed and our egos burned. Though they are householders, as a result of worshipping in the dharamsāl Sikhs attain states known to ascetic meditators, and are guaranteed immortality (v3.8).

By putting "Vahiguru" and the Guru's words on his tongue, the Guru's Sikh drinks from the cup of love (*piram piālā*), which renders him blissfully mute (v4.17). Drinking from the cup of love, Sikhs are able to bear the unbearable and become benevolent beings (*parupkārī*). The relationship between Guru and Sikh manifests itself in *prem*, love. Those who continuously listen to the word lose their minds and achieve a state inspired by divine knowledge (k284). Just as the power of wine is not known until the point of intoxication, the splendor of the Guru's immortal words is revealed when the Sikh is delivered to the ocean of peace (after enacting the words, *sunī manai sikh*, k374).

Gurdas implores his co-religionists to go even deeper than the inspired states, and use the divine word to change their lives. A container can hold liquor, but remain unchanged by it. A distiller does not get drunk by simply coming into contact with his product. Similarly, many people interact with the word (*likh par gāvat*), but the person who gains intimate knowledge of the immortal state is rare (k530). The establishment (*pragaṭ*) of perfect love (*puran prem*) supersedes all other forms of devotion:

Built straw by straw, a thatched hut  
is reduced to ash by a spark of fire  
Children build castles on the ocean shore  
but one swelling wave brings them crashing down  
Countless deer congregate in the forest  
and, at the lion's roar, all flee  
Sight and sound, knowledge and focus  
are left behind at the onset of perfect love (k531)

Gurdas is very conscious of the idea that there is “something more,” an experience that is paramount to the means that one approaches to get at it. Those means, even though some of them are employed to demarcate the Sikh community's boundaries—probably the primary goal of Gurdas's writings—are not the ends in themselves. Simply acting is not enough; one must translate one's actions into benevolence for the good of the world.

### **Congregational Life**

The importance of the Sikhs coming together in congregation is a chief concern

in early Sikh writings. The mid-seventeenth century treatise of South Asian religions, *Dabistan*, registers this importance, and adds information about Sikhs collectively gathering in assembly to make supplications to the divine, and Guru consulting the congregation about his wishes.<sup>38</sup> As discussed above, Gurdas emphasizes the divine presence in the kirtan-performing congregation (k302-4). He uses another powerful idea from Guru Nanak's compositions, the Realm of Truth (*sach khand*) to emphasize not only the presence of God in the Sangat, but the location of the congregation in the divine presence (for example, k125, v6.1). For Gurdas, this means, among other things, that what Sikhs practice in the congregation has currency and merit for their lives in the hereafter. Appearing in the congregation for even a tiny fraction of one's day is meritorious (k310).

**Service.** How can one participate in the congregation? The most important way is through service (*sevā*) for members of the congregation and any newcomers — because there are no constraints on who can arrive there. Sikhs can fetch water, grind wheat for bread, stoke wood for the kitchen, take care of the poor, wash the feet of newcomers, and take care of the pious (v14.18-20). By Gurdas's time, the free kitchen, or langar, was a long-established Sikh institution that the community

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<sup>38</sup> See Grewal and Habib, *Sikh History from Persian Sources : Translations of Major Texts*, 76, 78. As we know from the discussion of *sākhā* earlier in this chapter, Sikhs routinely came together for interaction with the Guru. Gurdas also mentions the supplication (*ardās*) that curious Sikhs make in front of Guru Hargobind, asking him about the future of the office of the Guru (v1.48).

was proud of advertising.<sup>39</sup> One can beat the dust out of the blankets used by the community, and being covered in the holy dust of the community's members is a treat (v20.10). One can fill water jugs for the good people to drink, bring sweets and distribute them (see also k309). Through his poetry Gurdas inspires Sikhs to cultivate a love for service (k656). Indeed, service is the most efficient way for Sikhs to reach the transcendent Guru, god amongst gods (k143). As such, the Sikh congregation is, like a tree, a source of support and shade in the world.

Gurdas repeatedly portrays the congregation as the Guru's true court. Those devoted to him have already achieved liberation. The Sikh community can overcome any burden by keeping its focus on the congregation (v11.8). One of the reasons why the Sikh congregation is so special is because it is a unique combination of people from the highest to lowest segments of society: an enactment of the most basic Sikh principle of egalitarianism. Members of all four castes arrive in the congregation and are to be considered equal.<sup>40</sup> All members fall at each other's feet, and worship one another (v9.1). Gurdas provides a recipe for *panchamrit* ("five-faceted ambrosia"), elsewhere known as *māhāprasād* ("great blessing"), known to Sikhs today as *kaṛāh prasād* ("blessing from the cauldron").

The combination of butter, sugar, flour, and water turning into a sweet dish enjoyed

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<sup>39</sup> See v24.20. Langar was a central aspect of practice at Sufi lodges, known as *khanqahs*, well before the Sikh tradition's establishment.

<sup>40</sup> See v14.2, k144-5.

by the congregation is a metaphor for sweetness of the community's social diversity (k123).

**Celebrating.** Gurdas is not only excited to report that the congregation is made up of diverse populations—various castes, age groups and people from four regions of the world—but that they came together to celebrate gurupurabs, holy days associated with the lives of the Gurus (v29.5). Celebrating these days together helps bring Sikhs together as a family (v20.7) and forms a part of Gurdas's conduct code (v12.2). Gurdas is clear about the equivalence of festival days that other religions boasted with those associated with the Gurus. The Guru's festival days, of course, far surpass others' holidays, be they lunar festivals of the Hindus, or the Shi'i Muharram (v7.10).

One of the core practices for the community that we know from outside sources associated with Sikh celebrations has been charity—individual Sikhs contributing to the success of the community.<sup>41</sup> In general, various forms of service contribute to the community's growth (v3.8). But Gurdas is clear that Sikhs collect the equivalent of the Muslim *zakāt*, or tithe, for the betterment of the community and steady inflow of contributions is a point of pride (k629).

**Contributing: cash and kind.** Particularly in the kabitts, though, Gurdas expresses an anxiety about *māiā*, which is not only the “veil over reality” in Indian

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<sup>41</sup> For example, see the several official epistles dealing with this issue: Singh, ed., *Hukamnāme Guru Sāhibān*, *Mata Sāhibān*, *Bandā Singh Ate Khālsa Jī De*.

philosophies, but also a euphemism for money or wealth. In two consecutive kabitts, Gurdas expresses confidence about money. For the Sikhs, *māiā* is pure and auspicious (k384). The Guru's Sikhs use it for benevolent acts, and the good of the world (k385).

Satellite congregations' collection of funds for the central Sikh treasury is a documented aspect of early Sikh culture.<sup>42</sup> In the early part of the century, this was a celebrated part of Sikh life, as Gurdas refers to a number of leaders of disparate communities in his Eleventh Vār indexing important Sikhs. The embezzlement of these funds by middlemen seems to have been a problem during Gurdas's time.

At this point in the work it will be sufficient to say that the issue of embezzlement of funds underscores the challenge in Gurdas's day of developing and maintaining linkages between the satellite communities, the Sikh center, and the Guru. That a handful of important stanzas in Gurdas's Brajbhāshā works highlight this point indicates the existence of a problem in the central Indian congregations, which these works targeted. Gurdas says that the uninitiated should keep their eyes off the Guru's coffers, and that one goes to a religious place to escape veil of illusion—if one falls victim to it there, where can one go for liberation?<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> The issue was contentious enough to lead to the tenth Guru's elimination of the office of the satellite representative (manji, or masand) in the late seventeenth century.

<sup>43</sup> See k505, k517, k518, k544, k545.

One way that Gurdas tries to resolve the tension between the geographical center and peripheral communities—and preclude the embezzlement of funds by corrupt middlemen—is by raising the importance of visiting the center for Sikh practice. Gurdas calls all Sikhs to make a pilgrimage (*tīrath*) to the Guru’s tank (*gur-sar*, which was at the center of the Amritsar community, v4.18). In a number of places in the vārs, Gurdas underscores the importance of physically going to have audience (*darshan*) with the Guru (for example v12.1). Those who have never met the Holy, True Guru, but take audience with other impious impostors cultivate evil habits (k634). A number of Gurdas’s kabitts voice the pain of separation of a young bride whose lover lives in a distant land (*videsh*). Most afflicted is the bride who does not attempt to see the beloved with her own eyes (k642).

### **Rituals of Greeting, Devotion, and Initiation**

Gurdas displays a predilection for the symbolic value of feet, which connote humility in several religious traditions. He says on numerous occasions that the feet are the most blessed part of the body, that the water from washing the feet of the Gurmukhs is sought after, universally, and provides a means to liberation (see for one example v25.12). Feet cannot see, hear, or taste: yet they are elevated in worship precisely because they are low, and thereby humble (k289).

**Feet-falling.** Gurdas repeatedly identifies “falling at feet” (*pairi painā*) as a

chief form of the Gurmukh Panth's customs (*rahirās*, v9.1). Gurdas says that when the Guru's Sikhs meet each other in the congregation, their love is so great as to inspire them to coil up with each other's feet.<sup>44</sup> Belonging to the community of pious Sikhs is the highest form of human life, and the holy congregation, adheres to the custom (again, *rahirās*) of falling at each other's feet (*pairī pāiā*, v19.2).

Gurdas implores Sikhs to practice feet-falling, because it inspires the most important Sikh sentiment: humility, which in turn opens the possibilities of great spiritual achievement (v4.3). Indeed, this practice is just as important in Sikh conduct as listening to the divine word, taking audience with the Guru, and contemplating "Vahiguru".<sup>45</sup> Humankind's lack of mutual respect (*koī nā kissai pūjdā*, v1.7) was one of the great problems in the pre-Sikh world, and a major aspect of Guru Nanak's divinely commissioned mission was to spread strict egalitarianism (*rāṇā rank barābarī*) throughout the world by the ritual of feet-falling (v1.23). Gurdas promises that by Sikhs succumbing to other Sikhs as part of the feet-falling practice, the community will be able to conquer the world (v11.3). The broad implications of this kind of statement for Sikh self-perception and evangelism will be explored later in this chapter.

**Welcoming.** How did Sikhs bring new members into the fold? Typically,

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<sup>44</sup> Gurdas uses a strong verb here: *lipaṭaṇā* ("to cling to," "to wrap," or "to embrace," k309).

<sup>45</sup> See v4.17. See also v5.1, v23.1.



scholars have held that the Sikh ceremony (*charanamrit*, or *charan-odak*) was no different from various Hindu ceremonies in which the feet of a religious master were dipped in liquid that was drunk by new initiates.<sup>46</sup> Recently, Gurinder Singh Mann has touched on the possibility that the early Sikh initiation ceremony at Kartarpur reversed the roles from the Hindu ceremony. Instead of the initiate drinking water in which the master's foot had been dipped, the Sikh ceremony entailed established Sikhs drinking water in which the new initiate's toe had been dipped.<sup>47</sup>

Indeed, Gurdas's writings seem to indicate that early Sikhs initiated members into the community through the imbibement of their feet-wash by practicing Sikhs. Drinking *charanamrit* (feet-nectar) is one of the many service-oriented practices in which Sikhs engage in the Sangat, on par with drawing water for worshippers to drink, fanning the congregation, and grinding wheat for the communal meal. Gurdas writes about "obtaining feet-nectar" (*charanamrit pāvai*) as if it were a rank of merit, or a special designation that Sikhs should seek out (v6.12). Sikhs should also seek out and find others of the Guru's Sikhs and worship their feet as they walk the

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<sup>46</sup> The current understanding of the ceremony can be summarized thus: "In early Sikhism, the neophytes sipped water poured over the Guru's toe to be initiated into the fold" ("Pahul," Taran Singh in Harbans Singh, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Sikhism*, Fourth ed., 4 vols., vol. 3 (Patiala: Punjabi University, 2002), 263.). See also: McLeod, *Sikhs of the Khalsa: A History of the Khalsa Rahit*, 201-2.

<sup>47</sup> See: Mann, *Sikhism*, 27., Gurinder Singh Mann, "Rise and Demise of Sikh Initiation Ceremony," (Lund University, Sweden: 2004). I am indebted to personal conversations with Dr. Mann, and inspired by his paper on the Sikh *charanamrit* ceremony. I hope to advance beyond the issue of "reversal" that we have discussed by investigating (1) the embattled nature of this ritual and Gurdas's defense of it, and (2) how closely it was related to Bhai Gurdas's vision of the community's growth in the face of its unbearable burden (*apū pī, ajar jarnā*).

Guru's path, travel the distance to the gurdwara, and rest in the congregation (v6.13). The ethic of welcoming and embracing non-Sikhs as well as other Sikhs is important to this community, which is understandable as its numbers were so few and the anxiety about growth was so great. In a highly vivid reinterpretation of the Puranic story of Krishan and his poor friend Sudama, Gurdas drives home the high level of respect that ought be granted to the visitor. In Gurdas's version, Sudama visits his old friend, the prince Krishan, who leaves his throne to welcome Sudama at his gate. Krishan circumambulates his friend, touches his feet, and embraces him. He then places Sudama on the throne, washes his feet, and drinks the water (v10.9). As in the *charaṇamrit* ceremony, the visitor takes the place of the Guru as the object of veneration, and the agent whose feet are to be washed and foot-water drunk.

The *charaṇamrit* is transformative.<sup>48</sup> Touching the feet of one who has come

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<sup>48</sup> By ritually drinking feet-nectar (*charaṇodak achman*) one finds liberation (*khalāstī*) from all ills and ailments (v25.18). Applying the dust of feet to one's forehead erases the writ of past deeds, ritually drinking feet-nectar (*charaṇodak lai achman*) erases the diseases of ego and dual-nature (v16.19). The dust from the feet of holy people delivers liberation, erases the writ of past lives, and feet nectar helps bring the mind under control (v23.3, see also k38). Feet nectar is pure, erases all impurities, and negates the ill effects of past actions (v40.22). The drinking of *charaṇamrit* offers liberation for the whole world (k38). Gurdas argues for the central role of *charaṇamrit* in reducing the caste distinctions, which makes one ready for congregational life and strengthens ties in the community. Furthermore, it helps earn merit for the hereafter (v16.21). According to Gurdas, the above-discussed practice of *pāiri-painā*, Sikhs touching each other's feet, has a similar set of effects. The feet-toucher wipes away the disease of self-ness, and the perfect true Guru himself performs the cure (v4.3). Even the Hindu gods and goddesses seek the dust of the Sikhs' feet (v23.5).

For Gurdas, it seems that these powers are related to humility, equality, and service. Gurdas says the devotee can cultivate humility and faith (*bisvās*) by desiring *charaṇamrit* (k290). The Sikh community, Gurmukh Panth, remains astute in its focus on the divine word. *Charaṇamrit* is a treasure, which, when quaffed, delivers an unusual faith (*bisam bisvās*) to the pious (k322). A

to the community, despite his or her caste status or social place, deepens the commitment of one to the tradition. The Sikh practice of falling at other Sikhs' feet underscores the equality of all, from regent to mendicant (*rājā rank barābarī*, v23.20). The new Sikhs are like the magical touchstone (*pāras*), signifying the importance of communal growth. The transformative, contagious power lies in the same processes that contribute to the community's expansion and growth.<sup>49</sup> Hemp can be mis-employed if it is used as a noose, but when used to make mats for the congregation, it is purified because it is touched by the feet-dust of the holy people there (v25.19). Gurdas tells Sikhs to fall at one another's feet, and get their feet washed (*pairī pai gursikh pair dhuāiā*, v20.6).

Putting the feet of Sikhs, as opposed to the community leader, or an icon of a

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powerful experience of faith, very much related to the humility it instills in the practitioner because of the egalitarianism it stands for, is the conduit for this ritual's efficacy. Because the feet are the lowest, this practice kills one's ego, and the world falls at the feet of that one who falls at his peer's feet (k288).

Gurdas says that Sikhs in the congregation enjoy the scent of the lotus feet, and drink an unparalleled, incomparable, and unique nectar (*nijhar apār dhār... paramadabhut gati ān nahi sansārī hai*, k285). In Vār 25, he tells us that the feet are the most blessed part of the body; even the water from a head wash is impure compared to the Gurmukh's feet water, which is sought after by the whole world: it is the means to deliverance (v25.12).

<sup>49</sup> The feet nectar of the saintly in hand, we are transformed as if by contact with the magical touchstone (*pāras*, k226). In the Kabitt previous to the one just mentioned, Gurdas had talked about how members of all the four castes of society come together to form a casteless group, and their accomplishment is made known throughout the world like the delicate fragrance of the most sublime grove of sandalwood (k225). In a stanza of the Vār that catalogues the locations of important members of the community, Gurdas writes of how the Sikhs have combined the four castes into one via the *charaṇamrit* ritual (v11.7). In this stanza he writes of how Sikhs are transformed like iron is transformed to gold by alchemical processes, and how a jungle is transformed to a garden by the fragrant presence of sandal.

deity, in such a central position in ritual practices would have been transgressive acts. Gurdas is conscious of this transgression and dedicates Vārs 16 and 23 to underscoring the importance and legitimacy of the Sikh rituals. This transgressive quality of the reversed rituals is the reasons for their power and efficacy.

Vār 23 makes a complex argument about the greatness of the *charaṇamrit* ceremony. In the second stanza of this vār, Gurdas argues against the relevance of pilgrimage (*tīrath*) to sacred centers of Hindu lore:

They call them “redeeming,” saying pilgrimages wash away our sins  
Pilgrimages are of no use without an audience with the holy  
Holiness comes from a holy heart: where the Guru’s lotus feet reside  
Praise of the holy is wondrous and lofty, they are one-in-a-million  
But the holy Sikhs are countless! With dharamsāls all around  
Falling at feet, washing them, they take feet nectar and worship feet  
The fruit of the Gurmukhs is ineffable (v23.2)

We can glean from this stanza’s content that Sikhs have a clear concept of us-and-them: non-Sikhs go to pilgrimages, but can get the same effect from Sikh worship. For Sikhs, the practice of washing Sikhs’ feet is the ritual equivalent of going on pilgrimage. By arguing that the Sikhs replace the *sādhs*, or holy people, Gurdas justifies the drinking of their feet-water. Furthermore, Gurdas makes a clear ploy to attract those who would put a stake in worship at tiraths to participate in the Sikh community.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Curiously, there seems to be another twist to the Sikh conception of the *charaṇamrit* ceremony as evidenced by Gurdas’s works. Sikhs seem to have retained the pre-existing idea of the worship of the Guru’s feet in another ceremony, also referred to as *charaṇamrit*. Gurdas mentions at various points that the Guru’s feet are objects of veneration (See: v7.11, v11.3, v11.6, v12.19, v13.19,

## Others' Religious Practices

This equivalence of the Sikh practice of *charaṇamrit* with the worship at tiraths underscores the confidence with which Gurdas views the Sikh tradition's status as a distinct religious tradition with practices comparable, and superior to, other religions of the time. Gurdas also linked *charaṇamrit* with Sikh distinctiveness in the kabitts, where drinking the feet-nectar of the pious holy people of the Guru (*Gurmukh sādḥ*) speaks to the unique, or peculiar nature (*niārī*) of the Gurmukh Panth (k127). But in Vār 23, Gurdas's project is to show how the Sikh *charaṇamrit* ceremony makes others obsolete, and in addition to the polemic against tiraths in the second stanza, Gurdas reinterprets various Puranic stories to make his point. Seshnag, the mythical serpent associated with Lord Vishnu, does not know the splendor of the feet-nectar from the saintly people's feet (v23.3). For this feet-nectar, the goddess Sarasvati left the heavens and descended to the earth to take shelter with the holy congregation (*sādḥ sangat*, v.23.4). Parasram, Ram, Krishan, Vishnu were all happy to touch and wash the feet of the

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v23.10, v39.4, v40.22. See also: k66, k69, k72, k122, k249). Taking audience with the Guru, and taking the feet nectar of the Guru seems to have been something that showed a heightened commitment to the community to make the trip all the way to the Sikh center. Requiring Sikhs to travel to the center to achieve the audience with the Guru and the drinking of his feet nectar (1) underscored the center's authority and affirmed the ideal of exclusive allegiance to that authority, and (2) provided the community with tangible resources from visitors.

congregation.<sup>51</sup>

**Second-order thinking.** As we have seen from the discussion of *mantar* and miracles in a previous section of this chapter, Gurdas does not hold in high esteem many of the practices of the religious peoples around him. The clear sense of Sikh identity that Gurdas espouses in his works effects a denunciation of others' practices. However, Gurdas is not concerned with the evaluation of others' practices for its own sake. If the Sikh community is bringing in new members, those new members need to be told that the old practices to which they ascribed authority can no longer hold value in their lives. Gurdas does this by pointing out that since the inception of the Sikh tradition in history, other religions can no longer boast the power and authority that they once did.

Expansion of the Sikh community via conversion brought with it the problem that new members bore residual allegiances to other communities or forms of practice. Gurdas is clear: membership in the Sikh community requires exclusive commitment. It is this tension between growth and stability that effects Gurdas's expressed disdain of others' religious practices.

Gurdas denounces a litany of family-oriented rituals and practices; including the ritual announcement of births, shaving of heads, betrothal, worshipping of deceased co-wives. Gurdas proclaims that by renouncing these practices, like the

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<sup>51</sup> See v23.7, v23.8, v23.9, v23.10.

wearing of sacred threads, the Gurmukh finds something more valuable than a garland of diamonds (v5.10). In the same vār, he lists non-Sikh practices that lead to darkness. Without the Guru's *shabad* in the congregation, there is no other place for the good people.<sup>52</sup> Gurdas prohibits putting faith (*bisvās*) in signs and omens, zodiac, incantations, magic, animal-signs, and auspicious moments (v5.8). Hindu traditions are portrayed as a series of hypocrisies (v1.19). Hindu practices are like the blind pushing the blind into a well (v1.26). He criticizes Islam as well: not for its devotional content, but for its practitioners' unethical actions (v1.20). Non-Sikh religious practices are false, and in this Dark Age, too many of them persist. To overcome this problem, one must discern the difference between knowledge and ignorance (v1.18). The insincere friends of the Sikh community (*kapaṭ sanehī*) engage in a number of Hindu practices, which Gurdas lists, and as a result of their inability to walk the Sikh path exclusively, earn no merit for the time they spend in the Sikh congregation (v17.3).

The religious practices of others are like stars in the dark night, and the Guru is the sun making the stars vanish, a roaring lion making the deer take cover, and a royal hawk challenging little birds of duality and polytheism (v5.12). The practices of other religions are rooted in egoism (v38.7), but the experience of worshipping with the Gurmukhs is the antidote to this poison (v38.16). Sikh devotions,

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<sup>52</sup> The practices are: *jat sat sanjam / hom jag, jap tap dān pāun / ridhi sidhi nidhi, pakhand bahu ... tantar mantar nāṭak*. See v5.7.

recitation of the divine name, and celebrations supplant the sacrificial rituals of the Hindus (v1.16, see also k255). The gods of the polytheists are functionaries of the infinite divine being and of the Sikh congregation worshipping through kirtan (k302). Gurdas lists many of the important Hindu practices of the time and says it is only through the Sādh Sangat that the Transcendent Lord can be found (k304). The real boons promised by the books, gods, and penances of other religions can be bestowed to the Sikhs, for whom the divine manifests as Guru (k543).

Gurdas articulates a second-order, comparative thinking about what we today call “ritual”.<sup>53</sup> As we saw above, Gurdas compares Sikhs’ contributions to the community with the Muslim concepts of tithing, and he sees Sikh celebrations of the Gurus’ holy days as akin to other community’s festivals. Gurdas’s sense of comparative religious identity and the equivalence of Sikh religious practices with non-Sikh ones is further clarified in a stanza of Vār 23. Gurdas compares the Sikh practice of *pairī-painā*, Sikhs greeting each other by touching each others’ feet to Muslims’ *salām*, the *ādes* of the Jogis, the *onamo* and *namaskār* greetings of renunciates and Brahmins, respectively (v23.20). In another equivalence, Gurdas compares the *charaṇamrit* ritual to the Hindu fire sacrifice, or *yajna*. Millions of

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<sup>53</sup> Although for J. Z. Smith, a “second-order” category is constructed in scholars’ own explications on a particular set of phenomena, I think it is just as interesting to see the *implicit* comparison going on in Gurdas’s texts between the practices of his own religious group, and the others (who he names as other: Hindu and Muslim). Please see: Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).; and Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 269.



recitations of the Hindu scriptures (*bed purān*) compare to a tiny fraction of kirtan's value (v3.10). All the traditions of religious literature, all the gods, all the practices put together do not equal the power of one syllable of the Guru's word (k540). One of the final kabitts in Gurdas's corpus offers a powerful, poetic reminder of the importance Gurdas gives to replacing non-Sikh practices with Sikh ones. He says that visiting the River Ganga five times and bathing at the tirath at Prayag five times equals the merit from bathing a Sikh one time. He implores people to lovingly feed a Sikh water, an act equal in merit to making a pilgrimage to Kuru-kshetra. Feeding a Sikh is as good as the renowned *Asva-medha* horse sacrifice. Bestowing 100 gold temples earns the same merit as teaching a Sikh to read one word. Visiting a holy man twenty times yields the same fruit as massaging a Sikh's feet (k673).

**Practices as identity-markers.** Gurdas heralds Sikh practices and denounces the practices of others. Only Sikh practices fully utilize one's potential for the highest spiritual experiences, and the practitioner must renounce other modes of worship. In this way, practices—in Gurdas's writing about them, and in the Sikh practitioner's consciousness of them—become a major means for communal boundary construction. Only through the Sikh Guru, and through Sikh practices, can any of these things be accomplished, and the practices of others must be eschewed in order to do this.

On what does Gurdas base this belief? He articulates the idea that the Sikh tradition's advanced and simplified religiosity has replaced the potpourri of diverse practices and is a part of the unfolding progression of the cosmos in Gurdas's mytho-history. The Sikh tradition has replaced all others in its efficacy. Members of all other traditions are welcome to participate, so long as they renounce practices that fall outside the Sikh framework. There is no room for asceticism, as Sikhs live a productive life with social relations as part of their religious obligations. Practices like communal worship and liturgical recitation are set apart for particular times of the day so that Sikhs can fulfill the obligations to their work, their families, and their productivity.

When participating in the practices, however, which are all congregational, the Sikh can only achieve the true efficacy of the practice by surrendering himself to the practice, and this is achieved by completely surrendering the senses. Early Sikhs in general, and Gurdas in particular, were highly conscious of the power of ritual to modify social structures, particularly those of caste. Sikh congregational worship flattens caste hierarchy and legitimates the casteless ideal of Sikh society. Gurdas uses the discussion about the sense experiences of congregational worship to inspire Sikhs to deepen their religious allegiance and enhance their religious experience. These issues centered around performance are as important as beliefs and ethics to Gurdas's project of constructing a Sikh community and identity.

## **Conclusion: Early Sikh Practices**

When Gurdas wrote, a trans-local Sikh religious community could not be assumed: he was instrumental in the early processes of its imagination. Gurdas's great emphases on the modes of communal growth and consolidation need to be understood in this context: conversion, spreading the message of the Guru, and committing to exclusive religious allegiance. In emphasizing these, Gurdas was not writing about intellectual exercises. Practices, like successful religious communities, require bodies, and the early Sikh community required an increase in the number of bodies in its domain.

Gurdas's injunctions are the most extensive descriptions of what the early Sikhs did. At the time he was writing, Gurdas could not take for granted that his expositions would form the basis of Sikh codes of conduct to come. His goals in writing about practices were to publicize the greatness and welcoming nature of the community's activities to neophytes and potential converts, as well as legitimate the more controversial Sikh practices, like the reversed form *charaṇamrit* that they practiced. Later in history, codes of conduct reflect modification of some Sikh practices, like the initiation ceremony, but they did not diverge from the trajectory laid out in Gurdas's work. By the early seventeenth century, the foundations of Sikh practices had been firmly established.

This helps to explain why the early Sikh *charaṇamrit* ceremony has not received the attention of modern scholars. For hundreds of years now, probably since the early eighteenth century, the Sikh tradition has not been a religion concerned with gaining converts. The late 1600s shift in the initiation ritual from *charaṇamrit* to *khande dī pahul* reflected a concern for boundary consolidation rather than expansion. In the 1500s and 1600s, the Sikh community saw great growth, which cannot be explained solely by the charisma of its leadership. Sikh practices played a great role in Sikh growth. The *charaṇamrit* ceremony served as one conduit for this growth. From Gurdas's vantage point, that ceremony looks very different than has been assumed.

By writing about Sikh practices, Gurdas does not only leave historians a record of how Sikhs of his time performed their religion, he accomplishes a strengthening of communal boundaries and fortification of Sikh understanding about how to be, and not to be, Sikh. He offered commentaries on important aspects of Sikh life that could be a resource for Sikhs to understand what they did and why, and to advertise to potential converts what the community stood for.

Related to this, some of the community's practices, like the *charaṇamrit* initiation, were so contrarian, yet so valuable to the community's growth, that an explanation for why they existed was necessary. Gurdas's explanation and theorization of Sikh practices came much later than commencement of the practices

themselves. That is, beliefs about the practices are subsequent to the practice.

Religious practices have a logic to them that is verbalized well after they have been performed over an extended period of time.

The performance of bodies in particular, sacred ways is what makes those bodies “religious.” Simultaneously, bodily performance negotiates communal membership. That membership into the early 1600s Sikh community was determined by adherence to the performance of particular practices and the eschewing of others is not trivial. Gurdas articulates that Sikhs professed their membership not by words but by actions. For example, that he understood and articulated how the Sikh *charaṇamrit* ritual made Sikhs distinct from other groups assumes that communal membership and performance were intimately related.

The *charaṇamrit* ceremony helped to resolve the physical distance between the geographical center and peripheries of the Sikh community, and also made intellectual room for the idea of community-as-Guru—in the eighteenth century this is articulated as Guru-Panth. Similarly, Gurdas tells us that the performance of the holy word holds the power to bring about the Guru’s presence in the congregation. This idea also obliterates the geographical distance between satellite communities and the Sikh center and predates the concept of revelation-as-Guru, articulated as Guru-Granth.

## Chapter Six

### A Banyan Orchard: Gurdas's Vision of Sikh Redemption and Ascendancy

Falsehood is like a deceitful dagger  
Truth is a protective, iron shield  
Falsehood is a perpetual enemy  
Truth is a good, supportive ally  
Truth is a brave warrior  
Falsehood seeks false opportunity  
Truth stands unwavering  
Falsehood, fickle, trembles  
Truth grabs and thrashes Falsehood  
We look on from four directions, in all three worlds...  
— Bhai Gurdas Bhalla, from v30.10

Thus far in this dissertation, we have considered Gurdas's life, the structure of his works, and his statements on his contemporary community's beliefs, ethics, and practices. He writes with clarity of a distinct religious community. He is energized by its growth and is eminently hopeful about its future. He writes with an awareness of the Sikh tradition's place amongst other religious groups in society, and takes note of the political context as well. We have argued that Gurdas is an indispensable source for early seventeenth century Sikh life, because he lived through a crucial transitional period in Sikh history, marked especially by the pivotal 1606 execution of Guru Arjan under the orders of the Mughal Emperor Jahangir. In this chapter we consider what he has to say about adhering to tradition during difficult times, and the future he believes awaits his community.

## Suffering and Success

Gurdas's writings express concern for overcoming tragedy, and speak of the difficulties of walking the Sikh path. In particular, this chapter opens new lines of inquiry into Gurdas's understanding of suffering and its relationship with justice. We revisit Gurdas's works with new lenses for such concerns in order to explore the possibility that the period in which he lived was a catalyst for his writing.<sup>1</sup>

**Data from Vār 4.** A close reading of his compositions, particularly Vār 4, reveals his profound concern for the proper response to despondence and suffering.<sup>2</sup> For example, in a touching stanza, which has evaded scholarly attention, Gurdas calls to Sikhs from far and wide to congregate at the Sikh center and commiserate:

If you have even small hairs on your head,  
    wave them at the feet of the saints  
Take a pilgrimage to bathe in the Guru's tank,  
    and wash feet with your tears  
From black, hair will turn to grey,  
    know this as a sign that all must go  
Falling at feet, becoming feet dust,  
    the true Guru's grace is merciful  
Transformed from black crows to majestic swans,

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<sup>1</sup> Gurdas is extremely discreet about the issue of Guru Arjan's death, and understandably so—the very assassination of a religious leader of Guru Arjan's stature was an event designed to repress. Salient to this issue is James C. Scott's notion of "hidden transcripts," which helps explain how dominated groups keep resistance a private matter. See: James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: 1990).

<sup>2</sup> In several important manuscripts, this vār is in the first position, and what are today Vārs 1, 2, and 3 are not available in those manuscripts, or come at the very end of those collections. For more about early manuscripts of Gurdas's works, see Gursharan Kaur Jaggi's treatment: Bhalla, *Varān Bhai Gurdās (Sampadan Ate Path-Nirdharan)*, 54-58.

we feed on pearls <sup>3</sup>  
They call it “thinner than a hair”: learn the Sikh Way  
and teach it to others  
Sikhs pass with the cup of love (v4.18)

Gurdas provides a jubilant balance to the stanza’s subdued opening by comparing the Sikh congregation to majestic swans of lore. By underscoring the tradition’s perpetuation through mutual education of its members, Gurdas inspires his co-religionists to look to the future. A deeper look at the Vār from which this stanza was taken reveals an extended meditation on finding inspiration amidst troubles.

Several other metaphors and parables in this Vār betray Gurdas’s sentiments about the difficulty of Sikh life, and hint at the community’s designs on sovereign power. Gurdas says that things that are small, seemingly insignificant, and humble will have their day of triumph: the pinky finger can be crowned with a ring, a drop of rain can become a pearl in a shell, a piece of saffron can achieve great dignity when it is worn as a holy (and royal) forehead mark (v4.4). The ant, a drop of mercury, a pearl; they are all small but can accomplish great things. For example, the pearl can find its way onto the emperor’s necklace (v4.7). Gold, which is found amongst dust, suffers but then is turned into coins at the mint.<sup>4</sup> The poppy seed undergoes great torture (*sūlī upari khelanā*), but then earns the royal canopy

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<sup>3</sup> This is a reference to the mythical swans at Mount Meru’s Mansarovar lake.

<sup>4</sup> See v4.12. The mint is a very important metaphor for Gurdas. In Vār 1, Guru Nanak strikes a coin in the world and “mints” the Sikh community (v1.45). Also, the divine word is the true mint (v18.20, v24.8).



overhead (*pichho de siri chhatu dharāvai*, v4.13).<sup>5</sup>

The impact of even the smallest things can be far beyond their scope, says Gurdas, hinting at the eventual triumph of the Sikh community. Ultimate and lasting victory will belong to those who undergo hardship: “The low (referring to the powerless, perhaps the Sikhs) win, and the high (referring to the powerful, perhaps the Mughals) lose” (v4.6). Grass is trampled underfoot, but provides fodder for cows, which in turn provide milk and other products for ritual sacrifice. The mythical bull holding up the globe bears the world’s burdens patiently and upholds the celestial order (*dharam*, v4.8).<sup>6</sup>

Elsewhere, Vār 4 teaches that suffering leads to eventual success: the sesame seed is first thrust into the ground, then put through the presser, made into oil, then burned and made into eyeliner. Never complaining, it takes on very important roles (v4.9). Cotton also grows in the ground, is ginned, then made into rolls and spun into thread, then finally woven and dyed in boiling water. It is cut with scissors and stitched with needles, but it produces clothes to cover up nakedness (v4.10). Similarly, the sugarcane can boast of bravery (*sudhiṭhā*) amidst torture and suffering. It is shredded and ground in a press to produce the sweetest of saps. We ought to strive to steel our minds like the cane (v4.14).

Multiple times in Vār 4, Gurdas links the experience of suffering with future

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<sup>5</sup> Like the mint above, the poppy and its intoxicating effect, being drunk in royal circles, is also a core metaphor to which Gurdas returns to stand for Guru Hargobind’s method of ruling. He is emperor and mystic, his writ is for this world, and the next. See Vārs 11 and 39.

<sup>6</sup> In Puranic mythology, a cow, rather than a bull, upholds the celestial order. In Gurdas’s writings, and in later Punjabi writings, the gender of the animal is always male.

reward. For example, immediately after expounding upon the virtues of remaining steadfast in agony, Gurdas instructs Sikhs about the rewards of Guru's way: a true Sikh remains mute, drinks from the cup of love, and attains liberation (v4.17). The earth is Gurdas's primary metaphor for patience, humility, and forbearance; these are the keys to future reward:

Lowest of all is the earth, losing itself, it remains meek  
Steadfast in compassion, righteousness, and contentment underfoot  
It touches the feet of the holy, the worthless thing becomes worth-a-  
million<sup>7</sup>  
Drops of nectar fall and dust is satiated  
The poor thing receives honor, and it drinks from love's cup  
As one reaps, so one sows...  
The Gurmukh's fruit-of-peace is found in meekness (v4.2)

Metaphors of earth and trees are also linked to accepting the will of the Master, which is a key ethical point made towards the end of Vār 4 (v4.19). Dust, water, and nectar are part of the feet-nectar ceremony that is linked to Sikh communal solidarity and growth, and the implications of suffering's relationship to this is also discussed later in the chapter.

**Sacrifice.** Vār 4 is not the only one of Gurdas's poems to touch the issue of guaranteed future reward. In Vār 30, from which the epigraph for this chapter was taken, Gurdas makes the analogy between the pious man and the martyred soldier: both sacrifice themselves for their masters, both are praised for generations after. To fight and die for truth is the way of the Gurmukh Panth (*pūraṇ pratāp*).

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<sup>7</sup> This is highly reminiscent of a line from one of Guru Arjan's later hymns that discusses the suffering and subsequent ascendance of various poet-saints, or bhagats (GG 487). Stories of the bhagats play an important role in Gurdas's conception of suffering, as discussed later in this chapter.

Gurmukhs ought to maintain faith in their Guru.<sup>8</sup> The poet repeatedly offers himself to the Sikh community, asking that his skin be used for Sikhs' shoes (v9.18). Gurdas's code of conduct in Vār 12 repeats phrases of self-sacrifice and devotion, for example: *balihārī* (v12.1), *qurbānī* (v12.2), *viṭahu vāriā* (v12.3).

Vār 14 contains a number of double meanings. Like Vār 4, it touches on the ethic of humility, though with less focus on suffering. Gurdas portrays the congregation and community as self-propagating systems that require care and charity. Cotton, madder, iron, trees, sandalwood, and sugarcane teach us that sacrifice and suffering bring good things (v14.12-17). Service and charity help us through tough times (v14.18-20). Drinking feet-nectar brings a deep humility, which helps us to accept the Master's will (v14.6).

The kabitts have not at all been tapped for their ideas about such subjects, but have much to say. The poet sacrifices his body, mind, and soul for the growth of the Sikh tradition and appeals to the community's members thus:

Cut every piece of my body: little nails on my feet to every limb  
I give over my entire self to the Sikhs  
Take every piece of me and burn it in a fire, grind it in a mill,  
and let the ash fly in the wind, in every direction  
Wherever the Sikhs' feet walk the Guru's path,  
lay out my remains under them  
Touching their feet, I will be forever engrossed  
O! Compassionate and merciful ones, save this sinner thus!  
(k672)

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<sup>8</sup> He says, *laṛ marṇā ... sachi sidak, sach piru pachapai* (v30.14). Certainly, Kabir and others have made similar comparisons between spirituality and death-in-battle, but in the Sikh case the context is different, especially when Gurdas is clearly talking about Sikhs as a minority tradition living among "falsehood".

Just as a warrior readying himself for battle dons weapons and armor, but leaves behind his attachments and pride, so does the walker of the spiritual path ready himself to die for the Master (k617). Like a king abandons worry about who he kills or on whom he bestows great boons, the divine sage lives his life with a sense of renunciation for the world's tribulations (k618). Like the moth to the flame, the Sikh's readiness for self-sacrifice is the marker of his dedication, without which he ought not call himself the Guru's man (k551). The vārs' treatment of the impending inversion of high and low is a theme echoed in the kabitts as well, where Gurdas says that victory is defeat, and defeat is ultimately victory (k136).

Gurdas is certain that suffering and self-sacrifice lead to success, and he implores Sikhs to bear evil graciously: "At the doors of the holy, even evil acts are returned with kindness" (*avgun kīe gun, sādhan kai duār hai*, k326). As in Vār 4, Gurdas provides evidence of this principle from nature: the tree drops fruit when stoned and as a boat, brings across the saw that cut it down. The shell, when cracked, surrenders a pearl; mined stone reveals diamonds; sugarcane is crushed to reveal the sweetest juice (k326). Like a washerman beats clothes against a rock to clean them, or like a merchant cuts stone for diamonds, difficult times separate us from the grips of illusion (*māiā*, k614). When treated in the kabitts, the theme of suffering does not carry the same heavy tone as in the early vārs. Gurdas sings of the sesame seed that is pressed to make oil for a lamp, and a baby goat's sinews being turned into string for music. Likewise, a man is made holy only through hunger and pain, only then can he transcend the world (k580). Cotton sacrifices

itself without letting out a groan and is turned into a lamp wick and cloth.

Similarly those holy men who gain spiritual control through their own effort are a source of liberation for the whole world (k581).

Vār 9 seems to voice a quiet defiance. Though trampled underfoot like the grass, the Sikhs stay on the straight path of tradition (v9.14).<sup>9</sup> Gurdas exhorts Sikhs not to include themselves in any count. The Way of the Gurmukhs (*Gurmukh mārag*) is the true way, and the truth will deliver the pious Sikhs (v9.15). Earth (v9.19), water (v9.20), and tree (v9.21) all exemplify ways to tolerate suffering, lay low, and persevere. The Sikh should be like a dead man (*murdā hoi murīd*), remain engrossed in the word, and continue to reflect on the word even if trampled underfoot; the heavens will shower grace on him (v9.22). Elsewhere, we are reminded that one of the characteristics of the Guru's Sikhs is fearlessness (v28.10). The Gurmukh's love for his Guru is irrepressible (k410). Like the din of a war drum, the love between Guru and Sikh cannot be hidden (v411).

**Building on tradition.** In separate hymns in the Guru Granth, Guru Nanak and Guru Arjan make frequent use of the metaphor of the sugarcane's crushing.<sup>10</sup> Gurdas takes the issue of its suffering to another level, going to great lengths to describe the process of sugarcane's transformation at various occasions. Along with the virtues of the suffering tree, the extended metaphor of sugarcane's plight is

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<sup>9</sup> According to Gurdas, the Sikh tradition's path may be straight, but it is not necessarily easy.

<sup>10</sup> See GG 142-3, 1098.

a central part of Vār 26.<sup>11</sup> The wondrous sugarcane is made useful only after it is crushed: first its skin is peeled off and its stalks are cut and smashed. It is crushed in the press, and its essence is extracted, but it patiently bears its suffering and is thus celebrated throughout the world in forms such as molasses, sugar, and other sweets. Having drunk from love's cup (*piram piālā pīvaṇā*), it dies to life and finds a new life (v26.12).

### **Courts of Justice**

From Guru Nanak's time, Sikh tradition has taken keen notice of imperial matters. Guru Nanak writes about the transition from the Delhi Sultanate (1206-1526) to the Mughal Empire (1526-1800s), and lambastes kings and their nobles. Kartar is the Supreme Emperor, and the favorite Sikh vision of the afterlife is acceptance into the divine court. Guru Arjan speaks of his own army, his mansions, and his own "kingdom of humility." The Sikh bards write of the Gurus' empire, its royal flag, and other political dispensations of their court. Gurdas's writings are no different in this regard, and offer a host of statements about the Mughal court, Guru Hargobind's court, and the divine court hereafter. Whether in debunking the legitimacy of the worldly rulers, or in legitimating the kingship of God and Guru, courtly images are employed to articulate the Sikhs' claims for religious and political autonomy.

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<sup>11</sup> The broader themes of Vār 26 include singing of Guru Hargobind's royal attributes and singular legitimacy as spiritual and temporal sovereign. This indicates that Gurdas is writing about issues concerning the contemporary situation of the community, which makes sense in light of his discussion of suffering in the same poem.

**Courts of this world.** Gurdas makes a few, mostly subdued, reproofs of the ruling elite. Above, we have above discussed Gurdas's metaphors relating to royalty in Vār 4: the defiant Sikh mint, the royal canopy over the poppy seed, and the tiny pearl on the royal necklace.<sup>12</sup> In his hagiography of Guru Nanak, however, Gurdas is more direct and echoes the Guru's own polemic: the world's emperors are unjust; their ministers are butchers (v1.7). The Fifteenth Vār is also clear about this: the emperors of this world are false (v15.1, v15.4).

The progression of Vār 25, which is about the spread of the community and the inversion of "low" and "high," takes a fascinating detour for three stanzas. Gurdas says that in the netherworld burns a cauldron in which the waters of the earth boil on the heads of emperors. These foolish emperors stake their claims, fighting and dying (v25.15). He continues: in one sheath there cannot be two swords, and so in one country there cannot be two emperors, but holy men can live in God's house under one quilt. He again mentions the poppy seed, which obtains the royal canopy overhead when it is crushed in the press and poured in a cup. Gurdas adds, in the court of the Fearless One, the egoists are at fault, and power is with the powerless (v25.16). Gurdas relates the story of an innocent goat, which, on being caught for slaughter by a lion, laughs and wonders about the fate of those who cut throats and feed on others (v25.17).

**Guru Hargobind's court.** Gurdas's writings build on the royal depiction of the Guru's court commenced by Sikh writers in the Guru Granth. Vār 21 is

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<sup>12</sup> See v4.12, v4.13, and v4.7, respectively.

instrumental to the articulation of this idea. The divine court has dual, parallel branches: here and hereafter.<sup>13</sup>

The true Guru is Kartar's earthly representative; anyone who opposes him will be thrashed in the hereafter. The true Guru is the king of kings, free from care (*beparvāh*) and free from fear (*laubālī*, v21.1). Using this trope, Gurdas questions members of competing religions, as well as the existing imperial hierarchy.<sup>14</sup> Millions of chiefs, rulers of great courts, treasurers are here one day and gone the next (v21.9) and, "No sultan who opposes the Guru's house will be found in the divine mansion" (*gair mahali sultān mahalu nā pāvahī*, v21.5). The egoistic owners of great palaces, fort-holding kings, overlords who patronize their own laudation, and holders of royal office (*mansabdār*) will all be frightened at the divine court (v21.14). In the eleventh stanza, Gurdas lists all of those who will suffer at the "fearless court": the so-called brave warriors, those who listen to the teachings of others, so-called scholars, the ascetics, and the so-called wise ones (v21.11).

This fearless court (*laubālī dargāh*) is one of Gurdas's favorite themes, and further demonstrates Sikh confidence and the tradition's sovereign claims. In Vār

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<sup>13</sup> Only the Sikh guru is the true ruler of this world and the next (*dīn dunī*: 12.3.7, 21.4.5, 21.8.3, 23.13.2, 24.7.3, 24.15.3, 26.21.4). Curiously, the divine court is simply not a topic that Gurdas takes up in the kabitts, nor does he take up divine justice there. The closest is a reference to the Guru's house being a spiritual court. Only he is accepted there (*parvān*) who remembers, listens, and acts righteously while sleeping and awake; whoever wants can obtain the treasure of the Name (k619). The devotee can establish lasting dominion (*abichal rāj*) over his self (k246, see also k46). In the kabitts, Gurdas prefers to portray his message about the realization of the Sikh community in human history via the metaphor of the tree (k55-6).

<sup>14</sup> v21.2, v21.3, v21.13, v21.14, and v21.15.



5, he depicts the Guru as the king, the congregation as his court, and the Gurmukhs as princes and attendants. By serving the Guru, the Gurmukh himself becomes the king of kings with the Guru's grace. Unlike the treacherous nobles, the Gurmukhs are God's own princes and the fakes are revealed in the court (v5.11). The Guru is like a royal hawk challenging little birds, and the true king who destroys "otherness" (*dubidā*, v5.12). The true court administers true justice, and the poet sacrifices himself to that One who is the honor of the honorless (v14.1). In the divine court (*dargāh*) the world's meek will be honored (v21.3). The kirtan-singing Sikhs are the minstrels of God's own court (v3.3). The Guru's treasury is never lacking (v3.6).

In Vār 7, the metaphor of the emperor's property symbolizes the Guru's Sikhs. Selecting the best trees from forests all around, Kartar has placed them in the city of Amritsar, the sweet-smelling royal orchard. He Himself is in each tree, He cares for the lot of them, and the Gurmukhs are the fruits of this royal orchard.<sup>15</sup> Related to this, Gurdas's description of Guru Hargobind erecting a thorny hedge around the orchard that is the Sikh community (v26.25) has been called "the most appropriate metaphor for the smooth transition from the peaceful development of the Sikh Panth to what is generally referred to as its militarization".<sup>16</sup>

**The court hereafter.** The congregation is a parallel court, Gurdas tells his

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<sup>15</sup> See v7.17, see also 7.18-20.

<sup>16</sup> See J. S. Grewal, "The Sikh Movement During the Reign of Akbar," in *Akbar and His India*, ed. Irfan Habib (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005; reprint, Fifth), 254.

co-religionists, which transports us to the divine court. There, we are all sovereigns under one canopy, and simultaneously all servants contributing to its well being (v3.8). The earth is a righteous place where true worship happens; the loyalists are triumphant at the court, and the Sikh apostates (*vemukh*) are humiliated (v34.1). Like the legendary devotee, Dhruv, the low will become high in the course of divine justice; the meek will be honored.<sup>17</sup> Elsewhere, Gurdas writes that Sikhs are especially confident because the Age of Darkness is the time of true justice (*sachu niāu*); this seems to undercut the pessimism, which Gurdas attributes to the Hindu mythological system (v12.16).

Only those who have served in the Guru's court will find a place in the court beyond (v5.11). The Gurmukh understands that life is temporary. He is a guest at a party, a wayfarer at an inn; he knows he is impermanent like spring's colors. But he also knows that he is on a divine mission, and part of a group whose identity is permanent. The Gurmukh Panth is unique and cannot be led astray.<sup>18</sup> After a sojourn in this world, the liberation of the entire Gurmukh Panth is divinely guaranteed. Thus, as part of the divine will, Kartar guarantees justice for Sikhs. Each individual, faithful Sikh will find a place in the glorious divine court in the afterlife, and the entire Sikh community will find redemption according to divinely administered justice as well. Gurdas reminds Sikhs that God sanctions their

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<sup>17</sup> According to the Puranic legend, Dhruv was the child heir to a contested throne whose devotion and penance amidst hardship earned him divine favor (v22.2, see also v25.10).

<sup>18</sup> See v3.5.4, v19.20.5, v22.14.6.

mission, and their liberation is guaranteed, so long as they live righteous and pious lives. The pious were created by God Himself (v19.1). The entire Gurmukh Panth will be accepted into the divine court (v19.9), and possesses a divine gift (v19.19).

The divine, active in human history, is the true administrator of justice (v1.22). He turns the pauper into a king, and makes regents go begging (v2.4). Gurdas appeals to the Master's true justice (*niāu sachu*), which applies to each and every being (v31.17). In the court of truth, true justice is available, and God's writ prevails; ego is erased, and the unbearable is borne; for these reasons, the poet is a sacrifice to the divine will (v22.10).

Gurdas also writes of the court in the future tense, signifying either an establishment of divine rule on earth later in time, ascension to Kartar's celestial court, or both. In the context of the dichotomy between the Sikhs (Gurmukh) and the non-Sikhs (*manmukh*), Gurdas makes clear that truth will shackle falsehood (v30.6). This is reminiscent of the "winners lose, losers win" type of prediction that Gurdas makes elsewhere. Truth is a roaring lion, falsehood is a deer fleeing in fear; truth is the shining sun, falsehood is the darkness; truth is a stone thrown at a fragile earthen pitcher (v30.7). Falsehood is not acknowledged in the court, but truth is always certified there, and forever in attendance (v30.19-20).

The scoundrel followers of the rival Sikh sectarian group will receive the punishment reserved for thieves, adulterers, and losing gamblers; they are equivalent to carrion-eating dogs (v36.3). The imposter jackals will be beaten in the court of the Lord (v36.2). They are surely on the path to hell (v36.4). Like

rebels against a king are slaughtered in shame, the counterfeiters will be caught, persons forging courtly epistles will suffer, the jackal who pretends to be a lion will be revealed by his howl, and the slanderers will be seated on donkeys with their faces blackened (v26.32).

The promise of the divine court for all Sikhs buttresses Gurdas's claim that Sikhs ought to accept the divine command (*hukam*, from the Persian for royal decree). In Vār 4, while writing of suffering, Gurdas declares that accepting the will of the Master is a key ethical point (v4.19). This statement comes immediately after the stanza in which Gurdas calls on Sikhs to wash feet with their tears and learn the lessons of impermanence (v4.18). Elsewhere, immediately after extolling the virtues of the Guru-emperor (v18.20), Gurdas implores Sikhs to agree to the Master's will, and to live in the present: Kartar will take care of the future; we know not why He does what He does; be content with what happens, you are a guest in this world (v18.21). Moreover, immersed in the Master's command; water cannot drown you, nor can fire burn.<sup>19</sup>

### **Guaranteed Sikh Ascendance**

Though proud about the community's contemporary success, and confident about its future, Gurdas betrays an awareness of his tradition's minority status, and

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<sup>19</sup> See v18.22. The language Gurdas uses here and in other related verses is comparable to the *Sadd* written by Sundar, a section in the Guru Granth containing verses about the third guru's passing and the fourth guru's ascension (GG 923). See also vār 19's discussion of impermanence, as well as v12.1, v22.11, v22.16, v30.15.

the paucity of its numbers amidst the Hindu and Muslim masses. Many of his stanzas contain an inspirational message of reassurance. That a thing is small does not limit its potential importance: the pinky finger can wear a precious ring; a raindrop can turn into a pearl; each blade of grass provides sustenance for milk-bestowing cows; a massive tree expands from a single seed. As an extension of these metaphors, Gurdas believes that the Gurmukh Panth's humble beginnings can lead to a glorious future.

Quite distinct from the ethic of humility that he requires individual Sikhs to follow, Gurdas elsewhere expresses the clear confidence of Sikh superiority over Hindus and Muslims. For example, Vār 7 refers to aspects of other traditions that the Sikhs surpass (e.g., v7.2). The Sikh path is a distinct path, and the best path. The Sikh Guru is the only righteous religious power, drawing his authority from Kartar. This authority was bestowed upon Guru Nanak and continues in an unbroken chain to Guru Hargobind. Guru Nanak was the world preceptor (*jagat guru*). He initiated the tradition that would reform the world and is the tree that provides universal shade.

**Sikh uniqueness.** The Sikh tradition's exclusive identity is beyond doubt in Gurdas's writings. Whereas in Vār 10 (treated below) Gurdas extracts moral lessons out of Vaishnava lore, and appropriates them in terms of Sikh teachings, in Vār 12 he completely detaches Sikh tradition from all things "Hindu." This is as if to make clear that there is no connection between the Sikhs and the previous religious traditions of India.

Similarly, Vār 5 stakes out Sikh independence and commences the polemics against the outsiders: *manmukhs*. The Gurmukh does not mix with other groups, good or bad; his community is unique (v5.1). The Gurmukh does not place any faith in demigods or demons, nor does he believe in omens, zodiac, or magic (v5.6-8). In contrast, the egotistical *manmukh* wanders (v5.15-20).

*Guru-Sikhī* is the way of the Gurmukh Panth: thinner than a hair, sharper than a sword, and ultimately ineffable. It cannot be walked with a single step, but its long path provides us with all we need, and more enjoyment than we have known (v28.1). It is a heavy burden, which only the Guru's Sikhs, who walk the path, can describe. Outsiders know not its worth.

Guru-Sikhī requires a pledge of exclusivity: those who take shelter in the true Guru do not worship any other god (k183). For the false friends of the community (*kapaṭ sanehī*), the Sikh congregation is just one of the many that they visit. They show up in the saints' society, hear the *bāṇī*, but walk not the path. Gurdas lists the other practices in which they participate, which he abhors (v17.3). He who sees from the perspective of Guru-Sikhī, seeks no other perspective (v28.7-8):

The one who crosses, drowns; the one who drowns, crosses by drinking  
from love's cup  
The victor loses, and the loser wins: this is the Gurmukh's way  
This way is like a double-edge sword and filled with scary waters  
This unique Gurmukh Panth is finer than a hair  
Ego is a heavy weight, the reason for evil diversion  
The disciple loses his self through the Guru's teachings and crosses  
peacefully (v13.17)

Only the Sikh congregation is spoken about in all the three worlds (k188).

**Guru Nanak's universal redemption.** Gurdas's vision of Sikh ascendancy is perhaps most clearly laid out in Vār 1, where the Sikh community's necessity and success is portrayed as a natural extension of the history of the cosmos. Gurdas re-shapes the Sikh past by taking control of Nanak's life story in a way that shows Nanak's mission was divinely sanctioned, and with the ethical imperative to steer right the deluded world. He writes that before creation there was neither breath nor flesh, darkness nor fog. Egg, sperm, body, nor elements existed (v1.2). Human existence seems to have happened quite late in the existence of the universe, but is its culminating point. Human faculties were created for devotional purposes. Sikh life is the highest form of human life.<sup>20</sup>

Before the Sikh tradition, there were others; and to explain the pre-Sikh world, Gurdas delves into Hindu mytho-history (v1.4). Gurdas depicts the extreme depravity of the times via the Puranic myth of the bull that holds up the global order (v1.22). Though the Dark Age is an ultimately just period in terms of human ethics (we reap what we sow), emperors in this age are unjust and tyrannical. This was true even before Guru Nanak's arrival on earth, and sets up his cause of justice (v1.7). Hindu ritual sacrifices are to be replaced with Sikh ethics and practices (v1.16). Despite previous divine revelations, social strife dominated (v1.17). Both Hindu and Muslim ways of being have left truth behind (v1.21).

Guru Nanak's mission is the divine answer to the suffering bull's calls. Nanak's solution to the world's problems centers around egalitarianism (*rānā rank*

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<sup>20</sup> Gurdas echoes this several times (e.g., v1.3, v26.3).

*birābarī*), showing God to be one in the world (*ik dikhāiā*), and the unification of all castes (*ik varan karāiā*) for the re-establishment of social order (each representing the legs of the bull). Nanak is the savior of the Dark Age (v1.23). The Dark Age is a time of extreme religious intolerance, and Guru Nanak's mission is a divine one: to clear up the confusion and set things right again. Guru Nanak, divinely supported, realized that losing one's sense of self and attaining humility were prior in necessity to ritual observance to pilgrimage rules (v1.25). Nanak set the world right with new institutions (v1.27). Both Hindus and Muslims revered him, like a roaring lion gets the attention of all deer (v1.34).<sup>21</sup>

Nanak was a world-conqueror, causing all of Baghdad to submit to him, and Mecca and Medina as well (v1.37). Like a king, he minted a new coin—the community of the pure (*nirmal panth*, v1.44-5). Furthermore, he crowned his successor in his own lifetime. Each successive Guru since then has been crowned a king (v1.46). It is in this context of the description of the Sikh founder's mission that Gurdas has him proclaim the supreme importance of the three forms of revelation: Guru, scripture, and community (v1.42).

Furthermore, Gurdas tells us that curious Sikhs ask Guru Hargobind about the

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<sup>21</sup> This statement is important to register, as Gurdas uses similar metaphors elsewhere to signify the community's impact on pre-existing religions. The kabitts' anti-Vaishnava polemics make an astounding historical claim: the rise of the Sikh community is like the sun coming out to hide the stars (which represent the worship of other gods and goddesses, k486-8, v13.23). The Sikh tradition is the latest of religions, it is the sun hiding the stars, a lion chasing deer, a hawk amongst sparrows, the day to the night of other religions (v40.5). These metaphors are extended to Guru Hargobind: the truth cannot hide, though others may try to deny it (v26.24). Divine grace is the sun, and all other efforts to reach God are stars; every morning the sun shines and the stars disappear; the Sikh tradition makes the other traditions of history obsolete (v405).



future succession of his office. Guru Hargobind answers that the Dark Age represents his clan's turn to reign, and they have established an unshakeable foundation to do so. The Guru descends to reform each age (v1.48). Gurdas adds that the completion of the current age, *kaliyug*, will bring on the dawn of a new, fifth era in which the divine will re-immense Himself into the world (*chāre jāge chāhu jugī panchāiñ vich jāe samāvai*, v1.49). At the end of that, the entire cycle will start up again.

This end of Vār 1 provides a segue to Vār 2, where Gurdas tackles the theme of how the divine is the beginning and end of all things. What has begun with Kartar will re-converge back into Kartar. The sub-text is that the historical period we are living in is the period of the Sodhis (Guru Hargobind's clan) who will bring the world to its historical culmination. The Sikh community represents the perfection of the divine plan.

**Examples from lore.** Gurdas buttresses his claims for the ultimate and guaranteed victory of Sikhs with tales of redemption from literature that would have been familiar to his audience. All of Vār 10, which has been maligned as a spurious composition because of its heavily Vaishnava content, is actually a central part of Gurdas's appropriation of non-Sikh stories of redemption. How could a vār about Vaishnava mythical heroes and non-Sikh poet-saints speak to Sikh confidence? Gurdas "believes that the Sikhs attained the same bliss received by" the pre-Sikh poet saints known as *bhagats*, and that "only the most prominent

saints of the other traditions were on equal level with the Sikhs of the Guru”.<sup>22</sup>

This view is consistent with the descriptions, in this dissertation’s chapter on belief, of the Sikh concept of divine revelation: throughout history Kartar has been generous with knowledge about how to worship Him, but correct performance of this worship has been rare.

As such, Vār 10 can be seen as a Sikh appropriation of popular, non-Sikh myths for Sikh ends.<sup>23</sup> Vār 10’s message is in line with that of Vār 9, which ends with examples of suffering (and which echoes Vār 4’s themes).<sup>24</sup> Muslim saints Farid and Bhikhan are not mentioned here, and Kabir (also of Muslim heritage) is only mentioned in the passage dedicated to saint Ramanand. Vaishnava myths provided Gurdas with a useful lingua franca to underscore familiar themes, as well as a medium to bury anti-establishment sub-texts against the Mughal imperial persecutors. The first nine stanzas of Vār 10 are dedicated to Vaishnava saints and descents; the final six stanzas relay stories about the power of evil in its relationship with good.<sup>25</sup> A core message is that even when appearing to lose, the Gurmukhs conquer the world (v10.1). The Lord, who forever assists His saints,

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<sup>22</sup> For this discussion, see Mann, *The Making of Sikh Scripture*, 118.

<sup>23</sup> That some Sikh thinkers have tried to crop Vār 10 out of Gurdas’s corpus or questioned its authorship is ironic in light of the articulation of exclusive identity for which he employs it.

<sup>24</sup> See also Guru Arjan’s discussion of the saints (GG 487).

<sup>25</sup> The stories treated in the first half of the Vār are those of Dhruv (who is in discussion with Narad), Prahlad, Bali, Ambri, Janak, Harish-Chandar, Krishan (with Duryodhan), Drapuadi, and Krishan (with Sudam). The next eight stanzas refer, respectively, to Jaidev, Namdev, Trilocan, Dhanna, Beni, Ramanand, Sain, and Ravidas.

destroyed the apostate (*bemukh*, v10.2). The moral of the third stanza is to keep faith in the divine, who intervenes in the affairs of righteous humans (v10.3). The fourth stanza also reminds us to remain faithful to the divine, though we may be ill treated (v10.4).

Gurdas also uses similar themes elsewhere. Gurdas's discussion of the ultimate and lasting victory of those who undergo hardship is close in theme to Gurdas's mention of devotee Dhruv's ascension to the position of the North Star as a metaphor of deliverance (v4.21). There are other examples of inspirational messages: Sikhs are raw diamonds; they are the rare ones who attain a place in the court hereafter (v13.16). Gurdas relates the story of Namdev, the devotee who was abused by other worshippers and banished from the temple. He remained loyal to God and a miracle turned the temple in his direction (see more stories in v25.4-11). Examples from the Hindu epic, *Ramāyan*, showcase the point of how good can be returned with evil, but suffering is impermanent and glory is final (v31.18). This message is in the kabitts as well: the low-caste devotees Ravidas, Namdev, Vidur, and Kabir are examples of how the lowest can become God's favorites (k632).

**Communal expansion as revelation.** Vār 11 is the most clear testimony to, and documentation of, Sikh growth.<sup>26</sup> Before listing the names of Sikhs all through South Asia, Gurdas declares that the Sikh process of revelation is complete: the

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<sup>26</sup> The importance of this Vār was registered from early on: it is the only Vār in the important Lambha Manuscript's table of contents to have been given a title. In that relatively early manuscript, it is in the eighth place. For more about the manuscript, see: Bhalla, *Varān Bhai Gurdās (Sampadan Ate Path-Nirdharan)*, 56-7.

Sikh community has everything it needs. Guru Hargobind is the true Guru, and as such he is the true emperor. The congregation is his true court, and spiritually, this means those devoted to him have already achieved liberation. As emperor, Guru Hargobind is bearing an unbearable burden. The Sikh community can overcome its burdens by turning its attention to its own rituals, its heart to the saints' society, and its mind inward.

Gurdas is deeply enthusiastic about the community's expansion, both as a process occurring in his time, and as a future goal. Two Sikhs make up the congregation, five represent divine embodiment; there are not words to explain when dozens come together (k122). Two Sikhs are the saints' society, and five are the embodiment of the Transcendent (v13.19). Gurdas both celebrates past Sikh success, and sounds the call to continue bringing people into the fold and spreading the community (v13.18).

For Gurdas, each Guru had contributed to the community's growth in his own way and Guru Hargobind's contribution is unique and perhaps the most difficult of all. Gurdas asks for Sikhs' patience, even though they may not understand the Guru's actions. He asks them to focus on themselves, and their community.

Gurdas demonstrates particular concern with two issues related to the community's expansion: gaining converts and the geographical spread of congregations. Gurdas says, blessed is he who hears of the Guru's teachings and becomes a Sikh of the Guru (k149). Spreading the word, teaching, and missionizing is part of the Sikhs' agenda and this is how they will conquer the

world (v20.18). Another metaphor for the spread of the community is that of trader and banker: the Guru is true banker, in whom all can trust; he spreads his wares in all the lands though other merchants sell false goods (v13.20). Gurdas tells us that there are different kinds of Sikhs, some are old but many are new; the Guru treats them all the same (k371). Gurdas offers his salutations to the Guru and to the Gurmukhs, because of whom Sikhs and congregations are countless.<sup>27</sup> The Gurmukhs worship with every breath, no matter what country they live in (v19.7). In the kabitts, Gurdas even writes from the perspective of Sikhs who live at a distance from the Sikh homeland, and saying that it is possible to be a devout Sikh, even if one does not live close to where the Guru is (k507, k639). He expresses Sikhs' desires to live under the Guru's graces and return to their homeland (k515).

Gurdas's metaphors are richly textured. The earth provides Gurdas with some of his favorite images. A telling treatment of its virtues comes in the second stanza of Vār 4: earth is lowest of all, steadfast in the virtues of compassion, righteousness, and contentment. When rain falls from the sky, earth's dust is satiated with this nectar. The contents of this stanza deeply resemble Gurdas's statements about feet-nectar. The feet-nectar ceremony, discussed above, gives even the outcastes a place in Sikh society, providing a very real redemption to those who have suffered. In decoding Gurdas's language, one finds that the mention of the feet-nectar ritual goes hand-in-hand with the themes of suffering and redemption, liberation and caste-less society. Consider the following three,

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<sup>27</sup> See k192-3, see also k366, v35.15. See Guru Arjan's description of the Sikh town (GG 430).

consecutive stanzas:

The tree's head is upside-down<sup>28</sup>  
Unwavering, it constantly bows  
It bears stones but yields fruit  
Chopped, it is made into a boat  
Water carries it on its head  
It takes across even the saw that cut it

Iron cuts it and is nailed to it  
But taking iron overhead, wood crosses it  
Water does not let the tree drown  
By dunking sandalwood its value is increased  
By doing good, good happens, the world knows this  
But I am a sacrifice to those who return evil with good

Who accepts the Guru's will gets his command followed  
The Guru decrees that we accept the divine will  
Drinking from love's cup, the inexplicable is understood  
Knowing the Unknowable, they do not divulge the mystery  
The pious lose themselves and do not get counted  
The pious attain the fruit of peace and spread fruits and seeds (v20.11-13)

The tree excels in its ability to tolerate pain and suffering: its head thrust into the ground, it stands upside-down and bears the suffering of wind and weather.

Growing, it provides shade to the world, and fruit even when it is stoned. It is cut down to make a boat but does not hold grievance against even the woodcutter.

Read in light of the community's growth, the Sikh community's suffering and its benevolence are intimately linked with its guaranteed success, just as earth and water are instrumental to the tree's success. Gurdas sees the growth of the

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<sup>28</sup> For an explanation, see Hazara Singh and Vir Singh's commentary. They say: the tree's head is its roots and it is upside down (*mudha*); its feet are its branches. (Singh and Singh, *Varān Bhai Gurdās Satik*, 636-50.) Consistent with this explanation is that of Narain Singh (Singh, *Ṭīkā Giān Ratanāvalī Varān Bhai Gurdās*. 380.) as well as that of Jodh Singh, (*Bhai Gurdas: Text, Translation, and Translation*, trans. Jodh Singh, 2 vols. (Patiala, India: Vision & Venture, 1998), Vol. 1, page 484).

community and its spread as an important political response to persecution. Vār 26, which contains the famous verses in support of Guru Hargobind, discusses love, fearlessness, and divine justice as well. Those who love (*bhau*) fear not (*nāhī bhau*); the mango tree bears heavy fruit and is loved by many a bird. Those who seem to lose eventually win; by falling-at-feet, we bring the world to our feet (v26.9). Only Kartar knows the reasons for His writ, according to which all unfolds; cultivate a child's innocence and see not the difference between curse and boon; we will reap according to how we love (v26.10). The tree, ever patient, takes even crimes against it as boons; it is benevolent to even the woodcutter; the apostates (*bemukh*) do not recognize the fruit that belongs to the Guru's loyal servants (v26.11). Gurdas writes:

The tree's head is inverted, but it yields a thousand fruits  
 Water is called pure because it heads downward  
 The head is high, feet are low, and the pious bow to feet  
 Lowest of all is the earth, bearing food for all the world  
 Blessed is the earth of that place where the Guru and Sikh walk  
 Feet dust is paramount, even the Veda sings its glory  
 Blessed is his fate who attains feet dust (v26.15)

Moreover, the true Guru sits on the true throne and weighs justice on a scale of truth (v26.16). Offenders are always brought to justice (v26.32). Again, Gurdas says, this Dark Age is ultimately just: we sow as we reap (v26.7).

Vār 16 is loaded with such metaphors, and it is interesting that the first two stanzas are dedicated to dust and water. The earth is praised because it is trampled and urinated on, but made useful in various ways. Water heads downwards (a sign of humility), and is purifying (v16.1-3). Later in the same vār, Gurdas proclaims

that God does the bidding of the saints' assembly; and by drinking the feet-nectar, Sikhs gain the power to bear the unbearable (v16.15).

In Vār 9, the beginning of which discusses the mystical presence of the Guru in the congregation, several stanzas reveal more about Gurdas's ideas about the feet-nectar ceremony. Adding water to the dust of Sikhs' feet helps to grow the Sikh tree. The implication is that, in the long term, being "trampled" will not be as painful as it seems in the moment, as earth and water will always prevail (v9.18-22). It is in this context that the poet makes the following statement of self-sacrifice: make Sikhs' shoes out of my skin, he exclaims (v9.18). Indeed, every Sikh's body is implicated in total religious devotion. The disciple should be a corpse, and bury himself in the Guru. Gurdas compares Sikhs' bodies to earth, out of which he asks that they construct a house of worship (*tan dhartī karu dharamsāl*). The eternal, ecstatic drip will pour over the practitioner when he participates in the congregation (v9.22).

The "Sikh tree" yields the sweet, peaceful fruits that are the Gurmukhs. The fragrance of trees like the sandalwood spread sweet scent all around; the unmanifest's ways are the subject of an ineffable story.<sup>29</sup> In other sections of the vārs, the characteristics of the suffering but benevolent tree provide teachings on how to understand the divine will, even when it is difficult to bear (v20.11-13). The issue is not limited to the vārs: tasting the fruit of peace from the Gurmukh's tree causes a reversal and expunging of evil. Its drinkers go from worldly beings to

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<sup>29</sup> See v12.13 as well as v28.12-14.



divine ones (k181-3).

**Communal deliverance through ritual.** In Gurdas's use of metaphors, the waters of the feet-nectar ritual must irrigate the growing tree that is the Sikh community. Drinking the feet-wash of the newcomers and of their Guru, Sikhs touch both the outer fringes of their community's growth, and the core spirit of the Guru, which informs it. This idea is at the core of Gurdas's message and culminates an on-going discussion in this dissertation. The chapter on beliefs discussed Gurdas's ideas about Kartar's sure presence in the congregation, and the community's equivalence with the Guru's authority. In the chapter on ethics, translations from Gurdas's 39th Vār detailed how Guru Hargobind, emperor and cup-bearing mystic, serves from "love's cup." In the chapter on Sikh practices, we discussed how "love's liquor" is distilled in the deep experiences related with the *bāṇī* and how interaction with the word brings about an incomparable intoxication. Vār 23 is an extensive legitimation of the feet-nectar rituals, and helps to reify Sikh boundary-constructing practices. Other mentions of feet, feet-nectar, and initiation, I have argued, ought to be seen in light of the data about how Sikhs inverted the prevalent initiation ceremony.

Benevolence (*parupkārī*) is one of Gurdas's core ethics. Embodied in the feet-nectar ceremony, in which established members of the community wash the feet of newcomers, benevolence becomes a technique to grow the community and survive difficult times. The enactment of this principle drives the attention outward from the community to others, and in the meanwhile it serves the community's

needs by providing it with a sort of “marketing tool” for publicity and access to newcomers. In one set of stanzas, Gurdas portrays the community as an ever growing, benevolent creeper (k38-40). In others he portrays the saints’ society as a grove of banyan trees, from one seed grow many trees, and thousands more seeds, ever expanding (*visthār*, v25.3). The metaphor of the pomegranate shows how a little seed can yield a fruit-and-pleasure giving tree, the enjoyment of which causes the pomegranate fruit to spread and grow into more trees, perpetually (v4.11). The Guru and community are the trees that provide shade (liberation, *udhār*) to the world, and scent the world with sublime fragrance (k37). The community is both one and many, both the seed and the tree, and ever growing (v2.9).

We have touched on the link between drinking feet-nectar and “bearing” an “unbearable burden.” That drinking from love’s cup prepares practitioners for bearing unbearable burdens requires deeper investigation in light of the beliefs already discussed in this chapter. The “cup of love” refers both to the intoxicating effects of the divine word, as well as to the transformative effects of the feet-nectar ceremony.<sup>30</sup> Gurdas links this “drinking,” as well as the metaphors related to humility, with bearing burdens (*ajar jarnā*) repeatedly. Drinking dust bestows honor on the honorless (v4.2). The Guru’s Sikhs hearts swell when they drink from love’s cup and bear burdens otherwise unbearable (v6.14). Grass trampled

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<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, J. S. Grewal notes: “The preoccupation of Bhai Gurdas with ‘the cup of love’ is quite remarkable. In later Sikh literature, it would come to mean ‘martyrdom’.” J. S. Grewal, “Martyrdom in Sikh History and Literature,” in *The Sikhs: Ideology, Institutions, and Identity*, ed. J. S. Grewal (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), 56.

underfoot bears what others cannot (v9.14). The spiritual person bears what others cannot (v10.14). Moreover:

Love's cup merges the saints' society with the unstruck word  
Focused like the nightingale on the moon, nectar pours over all creation  
Like the rainbirds and peacock, they dance to the unstruck melody  
Like the bee, they are engrossed peacefully at the Lotus Feet  
Like a fish in the ocean of peace, the ways of the pious are mysterious  
Drinking the undrinkable, they bear the unbearable and understand the  
inexplicable... (from v11.8)

There are many more examples.<sup>31</sup> The kabitts speak of a deep, mysterious faith (*bisvās*) that comes with the drinking of feet-nectar (e.g., k290-1).

The Unseen Lord is ever-present as He is present in a seed; the seed grows and expands, and like the Guru, from the tree come innumerable fruits (k55). Those fruits (Sikhs) contain the seed, and have the potential of the tree: from fruit to seed to tree, the Sikh community is spreading. Ever present are the Guru and God. Sometimes, Gurdas portrays the Guru as the trunk and the Sikhs as the branches (k37, k38); together they provide necessary shade, support, and respite for the rest of the world. Elsewhere, the sacred scripture is revealed in the tree. From the tree come fruits, flowers, and roots, which again cycle to root, fruit, and flowers. In the same way, from the father comes the son and from the son the father, the two are connected like warp and woof.<sup>32</sup>

The initiatory feet-nectar ceremony provides an invitation to outsiders to be

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<sup>31</sup> Please see v11.4.4, v12.19.7, v13.14.4, v14.5.5, v14.19.1, v16.11.9, v16.15.6, v16.21.7, v20.4.5, v22.10.7, v24.6.5, v26.13.6, v26.24.8, v27.20.5, v28.10.3, v1.47.7, v3.4.4, v39.3.1-3, v40.14.6.

<sup>32</sup> Here Gurdas adds that the Perfect Being is Guru Gobind, and Guru Gobind is the Perfect Being (k56).

part of the community whose members are on a divine mission to redeem the world, and by extension of Gurdas's logic, to establish a new kingdom of justice. Washing the dust off of the feet of the holy person with water and drinking it is not only a powerful curative (as the *Dabistan* evidence attests), but furthers one's spiritual progress while furthering the community's progression and growth by increasing its numbers. Gurdas is arguing that insofar as the community can stand in for the Guru, and insofar as the revealed word already does, the practices surrounding the community (initiation) and the word (kirtan) give Sikhs the spiritual confidence to see themselves as a self-sustaining community that bows to no outside authority and whose day will come in the divine court.<sup>33</sup>

## Conclusion

This is how Gurdas tells the Sikh story in its abridged form: the Guru is God's form; he started the Gurmukh Panth and made it steadfast to the ideals of meditation, charity, and purity (*nām dān isnān*). The Guru taught the Sikh way of life, transformed the congregation into the realm of truth, and established a tradition of humility, making Sikhs "fall at feet," the Guru's and each others' (v23.1). Sages and holy men before Guru Nanak employed the same values that inform the Sikh tradition, but there is a distinction between Guru Nanak and others: Guru Nanak's was a divine mission to create a distinct religious path in the world.

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<sup>33</sup> Scholars concerned with theoretical issues regarding the body, self, and society will find this interesting, especially how the imbibing of the feet-nectar in the body of one practitioner has implications for the social body of the group.

It is not just Guru Nanak's writings that are divine revelation, but his whole life is divinely inspired.

The Sikh concept of revelation, or God's agency through history and His presence in the congregation, is again located in the "three shelters" taken up at the outset of the chapter on Sikh beliefs. The chapter on ethics described Gurdas's understanding of humility, accepting the divine will, and drinking from love's cup—ideas on which this chapter builds. In the chapter on practices, we discussed how "love's liquor" is found both in the feet-nectar initiation ceremony as well as in a deep understanding of the *bāṇī*. The suffering and related success of the tree, and this metaphor relations to Gurdas's vision of Sikh growth, have further been developed in this chapter. Beginning with the epigraph from Vār 30 about the cosmic struggle between truth and falsehood, we have discussed Gurdas's tacit and discreet presentation of Sikh suffering under tyranny as a means to future ascendance when divine justice vindicates the community.

Thereby, this dissertation comes full circle by moving from a basic extrapolation of Gurdas's fundamental concepts through ethics and practices, and back to how these three fundamental concepts are the trans-historical notions on which Gurdas paints the picture of Sikh ascendancy and confidence. The central message is adherence to a Sikh orthodoxy and orthopraxy:

The Guru's form is revealed to the Sikh who contemplates his word  
From one fruit, a thousand Sikhs and congregations spread like Kartar  
Seeing, hearing, believing—the Guru's own are rare in this world  
They merge with feet dust and the whole world seeks their feet  
The Gurmukh Mārag is established, trading in truth they transcend

Their wares are beyond appraisal, indescribable  
The Guru's word is beloved in the saints' society (v29.20)

Thus, for Gurdas, the *bāṇī* itself contains the seed that results in the community's full bloom. The community continues divine revelation: the Guru is the manifestation of an invisible seed (*nirankār ekankār*), and the Sikhs are the fruits from that tree (k55). Each of the three is a form of divine revelation. Furthermore, Gurdas's "commentary" is as much on Sikh scriptural revelation as on the revelatory unfolding of Sikh community in world history. Vārs 10 (on the pre-Sikh "Gurmukhs" who are also Vaishnava subjects), 11 (on the Sikhs of the Guru who are the heroes of the ballad), and 12 (which is a commentary on the conduct of the Sikhs, their conduct) are cases in point to this insight.

Gurdas is not writing in a vacuum, but in direct response to the hardships his community faces. Gurdas speaks of these hardships, albeit cautiously (perhaps so as not to attract undue state attention). For Gurdas, the suffering that the community is undergoing is part of the unfolding process by which divine rule will be established on earth through the Sikh Guru and community. The community's success and growth already testifies to that impending reality. Its members' suffering is temporary, and will be redressed as part of Kartar's plan for His community.

## **Conclusion**

### **Bhai Gurdas Bhalla in Context and Legacy**

How does a burgeoning religious tradition, suddenly faced with state persecution, the assassination of its leader, and the imprisonment of his successor, survive to become the fifth largest religion in the world? Gurdas's writings not only tell us how the religion survived, but themselves constitute one of the mechanisms that effected its success. Gurdas, himself a major Sikh leader and scribe for a watershed Sikh manuscript, outlines the basic beliefs of the tradition, underscores its key practices, and speaks of a Sikh confidence in the face of the anxiety of the times in 1500 stanzas of his own poetry.

Perhaps not unlike the writings of religious virtuosos from other traditions like Nagarjuna, Augustine, or al-Ghazali, Gurdas's works are an example of the process by which a tradition builds on the bedrock of foundational ideas, ethics, and rituals in order to sharpen its self-perception and position itself amidst competing traditions.<sup>1</sup> In Gurdas's works, Guru, community, and divine word provide the fundamental institutions for the Sikh community. Guru Nanak minted a new coin, the Gurmukh Panth, and his mission was divinely sanctioned. All of his

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<sup>1</sup> I hope the comparison of great religious writers will include Gurdas in the future. I am grateful to Dr. Richard Hecht of UCSB for the concept of religious virtuoso, which we explored in a seminar he led.

successors, through Guru Hargobind, continued the founder's mission, completing the process of divine revelation on earth. Guru Hargobind is an emperor, not only of this world, but as well of the spiritual world hereafter.

Guru Nanak initiated the tradition of Sikh scripture, and he set the Sikh liturgy. *Bāṇī* is a core aspect of Sikh educational heritage, the source of Sikh beliefs and ethics, and each Sikh is responsible to read, understand, and teach it. Gurdas asks Sikhs to build their lives around the *bāṇī*, but wants Sikhs to be driven more by the spirit of the Guru's words than by the letters of his laws, a fitting perspective amidst the context of communal growth.

For Gurdas, the Sikh community is an expanding banyan tree. He articulates the need for Sikhs to take care of other Sikhs, and posits newcomers as objects of worship. The self-sufficient community is also a continuation of the divine revelation, and a congregation of five Sikhs embodies the divine presence. Gaining converts and expanding the community is one of Gurdas's loftiest goals, to which he dedicates much of his writings.

His audience is not the political elite of the time; it is the core and fringes of the Sikh community. He attempts to solidify the core's adherence to the Sikh center and to Guru Hargobind, as well as the adherence of those on the fringes. Perhaps this is one reason why Gurdas writes in several languages: to create literatures by which Sikhs can expand their base, reach out to larger constituencies,



and establish a strong, monotheistic community across northern India.

Gurdas refers to other religious traditions as well. His writings set Sikhs in contrast to Vaishnava, Shakta, and Shaiva traditions via their strict, anti-iconic monotheism. He speaks of various Indian religious practices pejoratively, calling them “tantar-mantar”. Coveting and greed are forbidden for Sikhs as beef is for Hindus and pork for Muslims. In his later vars, and as well in the kabitts, Gurdas asserts an ethic of gentle tolerance of other religious traditions. But he is also clear about his opinion of his group’s dominance: since the Sikh tradition's inception, other religions cannot boast the power and authority that they used to.

Gurdas’s articulation of early Sikh identity ranks among the highest of his contributions to Sikh tradition. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the clearest exponent of Sikh philosophy and practice wrote during one of the most tumultuous periods in Sikh history. The early 1600s were a crucible that forged the Sikh community into a more finished state. Gurdas’s poetry articulates a level of Sikh self-understanding that had never before been achieved.

Gurdas’s contributions are the most important of any Sikh to this day. No other interpreter of Sikh tradition has had the widespread impact that Gurdas has had.<sup>2</sup> Gurdas clarifies for Sikhs their obligations to the larger community and they

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<sup>2</sup> The important codes of conduct that some scholars hold up as important look to Gurdas’s writings as a source of intellectual and moral authority. Evidence from the eighteenth century indicates that Gurdas’s writings were held in much higher regard and more often in Sikh circles the text known today as the Dasam Granth. Gurdas’s ideas had great impact on Sikh life from the time

should treat their bodies, their families, and other Sikhs; as well as how they should regard themselves in relation to the state. His writings attempt to arouse a consciousness of the Sikh community, its widespread nature, and its certain, impending ascendancy. With an unprecedented clarity, he exhorts Sikhs to adhere to orthodoxy and orthopraxy. He reminds them of the nearness of the divine in their every action, and their ethical obligations to their religion. He articulates how newcomers should be welcomed into the community and clarifies the meaning of Sikh initiation rituals. He places the burgeoning Sikh community at the crest of Indian religious history, riding an ascending wave of tradition, transcending religious differences through its message, and achieving a pan-Indian presence that is part of the community's mission from God.

Gurdas's writings represent an attempt by an important Sikh to help the community steady its course while enduring tragedies. He writes of finding inspiration amidst troubles. He compares Guru Hargobind's increased politicization of the community to building a protective fence of thorny bushes around an exposed field. Gurdas promises that the entire Gurmukh Panth will be liberated in the hereafter, accepted into the divine court. By bolstering the Sikh Guru as the true king and berating the "false rulers" of the world, Gurdas underscores Sikh

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of their composition to today. They often echo the Guru Granth, and offer clear enunciations of its messages. Gurdas's conceptions provide early forms of the concept of "Guru Panth," and are underscored in Chaupa Singh's (1700) and Kesar Singh Chhibbar's (1769) emphases of Guru Granth.

sovereignty, and the notion that the community does not recognize any other authority. Problems with Mughal authority would have further required legitimation within the Sikh fold. Gurdas reminds Sikhs what their religious persecutions meant, and why the stakes were cosmically high. Sikhs were to continue their founder's divine mission in spite of the challenges they faced.

Underscoring the burgeoning community's beliefs would have been important in the face of rival religious and sectarian splinter groups. By controlling the interpretation of Sikh scripture, practices, and history, Gurdas helped Sikhs delimit their boundaries. In his polemics against Vaishnava groups, Gurdas berates Sikhs, whose parents had converted to the tradition, beginning to worship outside of the Sikh fold and reverting to the pre-Sikh practices of their ancestors and peers. Although the leaders of Sikh splinter groups and their followers are the subjects of Gurdas's most virulent polemics, the author advises that the mainstream community's strategy towards those groups should be to let them believe as they do and to act graciously towards them. Comparison between Gurdas's compositions and the writings of his counterpart in a rival group, Miharban Sodhi (d. 1640), would teach us much about how rival groups within the Sikh fold sought to position themselves in relation to one another. Perhaps future works on Gurdas will also position his writings in the context of early Sikh success and seventeenth century turbulence.

## **Towards a Life Sketch**

Let us combine the lessons about Gurdas's life that emerge from his own works with some of the more verifiable data from Chapter One to build a brief biography. Gurdas's birth date varies but most scholars today place it in the middle of the sixteenth century. Although an exact birth year seems impossible to ascertain, Gurdas may have been born as late as the 1560s or 1570s. Gurdas's father Ishardas Bhalla, was a cousin of the third Sikh Guru, Amardas (d. 1574). Growing up in the town of Goindval—the center of the Sikh tradition during Guru Amardas's time, and located in the vicinity of Sultanpur Lodhi, and on the Delhi-Lahore trade route—Gurdas would have had abundant exposure to extensive learning opportunities.<sup>3</sup>

Gurdas's name reveals a great deal about his place in his contemporary society. “Bhalla” indicates his family's Khatri identity, which may help to explain his comfort with the use of trade metaphors, his knowledge of trading communities, and, in part, his erudition. Furthermore, as a relative of the Gurus, Gurdas certainly enjoyed a position of prestige within the community—to say nothing of his own grand accomplishments. Gurdas's role of scriptural scribe, together with the large number of his writings, demonstrates his devotion to the cause of advancing the

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<sup>3</sup> Sultanpur Lodhi was an important trading center in the late medieval period, and place of Hindu and Islamic education. Please see Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*.

Sikh traditions’ institutions: scriptural, ritual, doctrinal, devotional, and commentarial.

His given name is not a trivial detail. Meaning, “slave of the Guru,” it is a characteristically *Sikh* name. This is profound as it is a religious name (perhaps indicative of his loyalty to his Guru), but not a strictly Vaishnava name as taken by many of his contemporaries. Though it is common for South Asian poets to include their name in the last line of compositions, Gurdas rarely follows this trend in his writings, except in a few instances in the Brajbhāshā compositions that are discussed below.<sup>4</sup>

From early on (by 1700), he is referred to with the honorific “Bhai,” and may have even referred to himself in this way.<sup>5</sup> In later Sikh texts, Gurdas is one of the first and most important Sikhs depicted. He is first portrayed as the scribe of the Guru Granth, and then as the author of interpretive poetry. By the late eighteenth century, he is also depicted as amanuensis, and as a community leader who held the utmost confidence of the fifth and sixth Sikh Gurus.

Despite the lack of data about Gurdas having married or having offspring, his poems extol the virtues of the householder’s life (*grahastī jīvan*), saying in no uncertain terms that it is the best religious lifestyle (*dharam... pradhān*), and that

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<sup>4</sup> The phrase *gur-dāsī*, “service of the Guru,” does appear in the vārs four times, but it is unconnected with the persona of the poet. See v11.13.2, v25.10.5, v25.18.6, v29.15.4.

<sup>5</sup> I refer here to the savaiyya numbered 555 in some collections, and 556 in others.

even the ascetic depends on the householder.<sup>6</sup> Narrativized details of his supposed celibacy do not emerge until late in the eighteenth century. More likely than not, Gurdas himself prescribed to the tradition of marriage that he speaks so highly of in his works.

Gurdas traveled widely, and Sikh traditional sources register his presence in Agra, the center of the Mughal imperial administration, and Benares, a major center for Indian religious learning. The traditional depiction of Gurdas as a traveling preacher also seems to have some basis in his writings. For one, he reports that he makes the Guru's word heard in Sikh communities.<sup>7</sup> His knowledge of the Indian *rāg* system of music indicates that he may have had some musical training.<sup>8</sup> Second, he provides an extensive list of Sikh communities from Kabul, in the west, to Bengal, in the east.<sup>9</sup> It is likely that he visited the established Sikh families through northern India about whom he writes. Gurdas bemoans the pangs of separation of traveling far from the Guru, and laments about how his life has passed him by in distant lands.<sup>10</sup>

The primary occupations among Gurdas's Khatri clansmen would have been

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<sup>6</sup> See k375, k376, k480, k548.

<sup>7</sup> See k501, k611.

<sup>8</sup> See v19.4.5, v34.6.3.

<sup>9</sup> See Vār 11.

<sup>10</sup> See k400, k401, k500, k520, k578.

trade, followed by work in the imperial bureaucracy. Gurdas reports knowledge of Persian, in which he may have been trained as part of his Khatri upbringing.<sup>11</sup> He frequently uses metaphors of trade,<sup>12</sup> yet is equally as comfortable employing agricultural metaphors, which fit well with the largely agrarian base of the society in which he lived.<sup>13</sup>

His first major contribution to the Sikh tradition was the inscription of the Kartarpur Pothis, by 1604. This task required access to the four-volume scriptural manuscripts in his hometown of Goindval. We do not know where Gurdas lived during the period of upheaval in the Sikh tradition after 1606. In his writings, Gurdas pities himself for having lived close to the Sikh center for so long, but yet not achieving the same religious prowess as some Sikhs who live at a distance.<sup>14</sup> His works discuss the execution of Guru Arjan, Guru Hargobind's political reaction to that event, and to Hargobind's subsequent imprisonment in the royal fort at Gwalior, probably in the 1610s. There is strong tradition that Gurdas was one of the Sikhs who traveled with the Guru to Gwalior, or at least visited him there.

The period after Guru Arjan's death was one in which Gurdas wrote prolifically. The volume of Gurdas's writings attests to their having been an

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<sup>11</sup> See v11.2.

<sup>12</sup> See k118, k454, k455, k475.

<sup>13</sup> See k121, k238.

<sup>14</sup> See k507, k639.

important part of his life's work. That he wrote in at least two distinct languages and literary genres is also significant. Gurdas's use of Punjabi has earned him critical acclaim and a place among Punjab's great writers.<sup>15</sup> His mastery of *vārs*, *kabitts*, *savaiyyās*, and *chhands* points to the level of literary ability he held.<sup>16</sup> Not only do Gurdas's writings reveal an author versed in Sikh tradition, but a cosmopolitan poet who was also knowledgeable about Hindu,<sup>17</sup> Muslim,<sup>18</sup> and folk traditions.<sup>19</sup> He was equally comfortable with engaging Vaishnava theology in its own devotional language as he was using the Punjabi *vār* in a characteristically Sikh adaption of a Sufi wine ode.<sup>20</sup>

There probably was a significant overlap between genres during Gurdas's career as a writer. Still, the increased self-reference and self-awareness of the poet apparent in the *kabitts* opens the possibility that some of these compositions were written later than the *vārs*, which give an air of anonymity. Also, certain aspects of Gurdas's *vārs* express more urgently the threat of schism, and more forcefully

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<sup>15</sup> Sekhon, *Bhai Gurdas: Ik Adhiain*.

<sup>16</sup> Piara Singh Padam argues that the only factor keeping Gurdas from being considered among the great Brajbhāshā poets is that his works are preserved in the Gurmukhi script, rather than Nāgarī. Please see Padam, "Bhai Gurdas Di Hindi Rachna."

<sup>17</sup> For examples, see his *Vār* 10, which provides succinct retellings of stories from Vaishnava lore, and *kabitts* 16, 18, 24, 31, and 461, which provide a view of his comfort with Yoga terminology.

<sup>18</sup> Please see *Vārs* 1, 26, and 39.

<sup>19</sup> *Vār* 5, 21.2-4, and *kabitts* 154 and 436.

<sup>20</sup> See *Vār* 39.



denounce the schismatic groups. As such, they seem to respond more clearly to what would have been the immediate concerns of Gurdas's sectarian group after the death of Guru Arjan. The kabitts respond to those issues as well, but are more muted.

In the rare instances where he refers to himself in his writings, he does so in a characteristically self-deprecating style. He confesses looking at women in the congregation, and says that he is a crow among a congregation of swans.<sup>21</sup> He compares his plight to that of the blind, deaf, and mute.<sup>22</sup> He reports that though he sings the word of the Guru, he is internally corrupt and Sikhs of the congregations he visits only accept him because he looks the part of a religious man.<sup>23</sup> Whereas such instances of the poet's confessional tone are much more common in the Brajbhāshā quatrains, he does use this tone in the vars at the ends of long, polemical diatribes. The confessional stanzas seem to function as an apology for the harshness of the polemics, painting the polemicist as the worst offender of all.<sup>24</sup> At the end of one such polemic, he calls himself *murīd*, an Arabic and Persian synonym for his name.<sup>25</sup> In the kabitts, Gurdas plays on the semantic meaning of

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<sup>21</sup> See k236, k237, k501, k522.

<sup>22</sup> See k314.

<sup>23</sup> See k611, k622.

<sup>24</sup> See v17.21, v36.21, and v37.29.

<sup>25</sup> See v37.29.

his name, “slave of the Guru,” as if it were an ironic title, or a joke that means the opposite of what it seems to when it refers to him.<sup>26</sup> Some examples of Gurdas mocking himself follow:

I insult the Guru with my ego, pride and foolishness.  
I slander the servants of the Guru (*gur-dāsan*), though my own  
name is Gurdas.<sup>27</sup>

He does not sip the Guru’s feet-nectar like a rain bird, he does not  
put the Guru in his heart.  
How ridiculous that he calls himself Gurdas.<sup>28</sup>

These and other instances show his comfort with his status as a writer and indicate that he was renowned enough in his time to have employed such strategies.<sup>29</sup>

As for his self-conception as a literary figure, Gurdas fashions himself as a minstrel or bard at the service of the Sikh community. The two categories, *ḍhaḍī* and *bhaṭṭ*, are key to understand. Gurdas calls himself a *ḍhaḍī*, of that category of performers whose domain is the *vār*.<sup>30</sup> But he also registers the fact that *bhaṭṭs* are the composers of *kabitts*.<sup>31</sup> Both categories were important in the early Sikh literary

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<sup>26</sup> See k189-91.

<sup>27</sup> See k191.1.

<sup>28</sup> See k551.

<sup>29</sup> See also k106, k107, k108, k216. See Gurdas’s use of “Bhai” in stanza k556, maybe this is another kind of poetic signature as it occurs in the last line of the final poem of the first known collection of his works.

<sup>30</sup> See k36.21.

<sup>31</sup> See v15.2.

tradition because (1) Guru Nanak and his successors described themselves as minstrels of the divine court, and (2) Gurdas's work has been depicted as a continuation of the work of the Sikh bards, whose poetry is enshrined in Sikh scripture.<sup>32</sup>

Likely dates for his death range between 1629 and 1637, with 1636 being attested to in multiple sources. All sources point to his having died in Goindval at a site later sanctified by the Sikh Gurdwara regulatory board (Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandak Committee, or S.G.P.C.). Some sources report that Guru Hargobind oversaw Gurdas's last rites, but the Guru would have left the Goindval area at the time, having been driven to eastern portions of Punjab by his imperial enemies.

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<sup>32</sup> See Hans, *A Reconstruction of Sikh History from Sikh Literature*.

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